

ACCORDING TO CONVENTIONAL WISDOM THIS TRUCK SHOULDN'T EXIST.



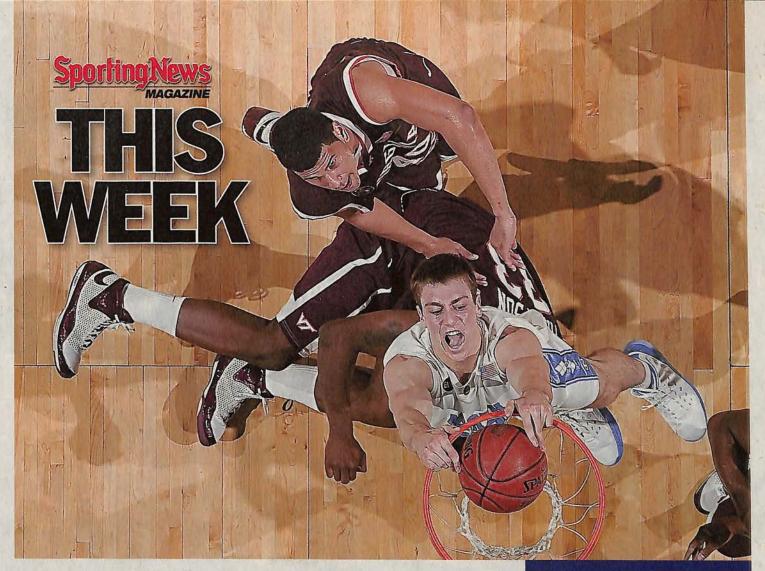
But it does. If we thought like everyone else, the Sierra wouldn't have near the payload or towing capacity.* Nor would it be the most fuel-efficient available V8 in a full-size truck3* It's proof that just because it hasn't been done, doesn't mean it can't be done.

*Cargo and load capacity limited by weight and distribution. **EPA-estimated mpg with optional 5.3L engine (FWD) 15 city/20 hwy. Excludes other GM vehicles. ©2008 GM Corp. All rights reserved. GMC Sierra WE ARE PROFESSIONAL GRADE*



THE SIERRA FROM GMC. WE ARE PROFESSIONAL GRADE.





> NCAA TOURNAMENT PREVIEW

12 You should be dancing

If you're Butler, Davidson, Drake—heck, if you're any of the 65 teams penciled into brackets all over this land. And especially if you're a college basketball fan. After all, this is the greatest time of the year. By Mike DeCourcy. Plus, a look at four unconventional teams trying to make their way to San Antonio, the tournament bracket and a breakdown of the four regions.

COVER

> BASEBALL '08

28 The American way?

If Travis Hafner gets back in the swing, the Indians could make a run at ending Cleveland's long championship drought. Trouble is, they play in the best darned league in baseball. By Sean Deveney. Plus, players to watch, a starting lineup and a scout's view for every major league team.

KNOW IT ALL

- 4 To Know List Bob Knight seems out of place on ESPN, doesn't he?
- 8 Patriot games An NFL player gets a taste of military life halfway around the world.
- 9 On Deck Red Sox vs. A's: How do you say 'Play ball!' in Japanese? Plus, Bob Hille's Starting 5.
- 10 Your Turn Barry Bonds and Matt Ryan, pro and con.

INSIDER

- 70 NBA
- 72 NFL
- 75 MASCAR
- 78 NHL
- 79 COLLEGE FOOTBALL

4

80 EXPOSURE

Nobody could slow down Hansbrough and the Heels on their way to the ACC Tournament title—and the NCAA Tournament's No. 1 overall seed.

Send your editorial comments to Senior VP/Editorial Director John Rawlings at jrawlings@sportingnews.com.

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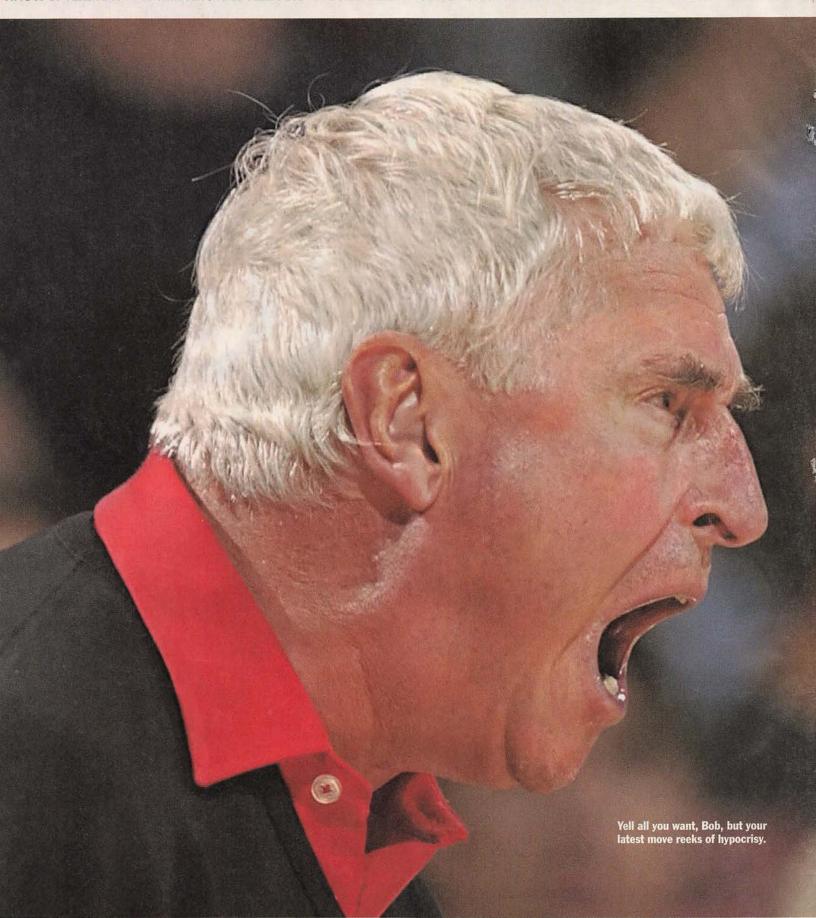
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C7

EVERY SUNDAY AFTERNOON STARTING APRIL 6TH

KNOW IT ALL KNOW IT ALL



TO KNOW LIST

5 things to make you an INSTANT EXPERT this week

1

THE MAIN EVENT

Contains artificial flavors

Bob Knight graduated his players, played by the rules and did his share of good works behind the scenes. He won a few games, too, didn't he? So it's easy to understand why ESPN rushed to sign the erstwhile Goliath of the sideline as a studio analyst for college basketball's postseason.

But Knight's status as the game's alltime winningest coach is not what has viewers buzzing around his every appearance alongside Digger, Jay and Dickie V. Rather, it is Knight's surreal and frightening dark side.

Will he snap on the air? Pound his fists in anger? Belittle a studio host or a fellow analyst? Use inappropriate language?

In short, will he embarrass himself? Probably not. And yet, I suspect some part of me wants to see it happen.

That's not the media vulture in me talking; it's the fan. I don't think Knight has ever made a distinction between the workaday reporters and the fans who don't revere him as his cartoonishly large ego requires. When he

Bob Knight is playing the sort of TV role he has mocked for decades and educating fans he never considered qualified to fully appreciate his brilliance.

stalked out to center court at Indiana's Assembly Hall 14 years ago, grabbed a microphone and—on senior day, stealing the thunder from his players—invited his critics to "kiss (his) ass," he was kicking sand in the faces of all those who dared to dislike him for being a jerk and a perpetual bully.

And now he is taking ESPN's money in order to play the sort of TV role he has mocked for decades and to educate fans he never considered qualified to understand the game or fully appreciate his brilliance.

One word springs from my lowly brain: hypocrite!

Knight had an insightful take the other night on the difference between two of the best players in the country, North Carolina's Tyler Hansbrough and Kansas State's Michael Beasley:

"Hansbrough comes every night to be as good as he can possibly be. I don't think Beasley does that." It was an opinion so strong, so unfiltered, it drew me in.

But then this grump's grump answered a viewer's e-mail on the air, an act that, in itself, was beyond absurd. "What young coach reminds you of yourself?" Ralph from Cincinnati wanted to know.

Knight, not surprisingly, didn't bestow such an immeasurable honor on any young coach. Instead, he paid homage to himself: "I always tried to be myself. What can I try to do through my personality that's natural?"

Certainly not this, coach. The real Bob Knight would sneer in your face.

-Steve Greenberg

SportingNews.com poll

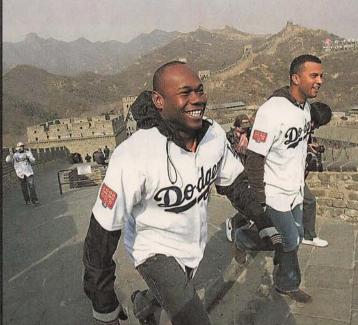
Bob Knight as a TV analyst: bag it or buy it?

BAG IT 41% BUY IT 59%

OM LEFT: SEAN MEYERS / ICON SMI; ESI

HITTING THE WALL

While in town to play an exhibition series against the Padres, Wilkin Ruan (left), Juan Gonzalez and the rest of the Dodgers took a break to visit the Great Wall of China. And no, we're not talking about Yao Ming.



TECH SUPPORT Hulu hoop

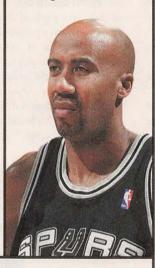
Pretty soon, you're not going to need a regular TV at all. Hulu.com, the latest and greatest in video-on-demand websites, launched publicly last week. In addition to providing full-length movies and TV shows both classic (The A-Team) and contemporary (The Office), the site offers plenty for sports fans. Watch last season's BCS bowl games in their entirety or (coming soon) full-length NCAA Tournament games from the past 25 years. The NHL and NBA also have signed deals with the websitefeatured NBA clips, for example, include daily highlights, top plays and top 10 shows (the "Top 10 bloopers of '07" or the "Top 10 clutch plays in February").

The catch? There is no catch. The content is free (though, depending on what you watch, you might have to sit through a movie trailer or a commercial or two) and the picture quality is pretty good. Just don't spill anything on the keyboard. - Tricia Garner



NUMBER THAT COUNTS

Bruce Bowen's consecutive games streak-longest in the NBA-that came to an end last week when he was suspended for a game after kicking Hornets guard Chris Paul. "The league is trying to send him a message more than anything," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich says of Bowen, who has a reputation as one of the league's more aggressive (translation: dirty) defenders. Bowen's streak lasted more than six years; the new leader is 76ers point guard Andre Miller, who was at 433 games entering the week.



YOU HEARD IT HERE

'The noise grew louder, into a rolling boomlike a dryer filled with bowling balls—and the fabric of the roof began to ripple. The scaffolding began to shake, and the big-screens hanging from the ceiling swung like tin signs from the vibration."

> -Sporting News contributor Spencer Hall, who experienced last weekend's tornado at the Georgia Dome and lived to tell about it at SportingNews.com.

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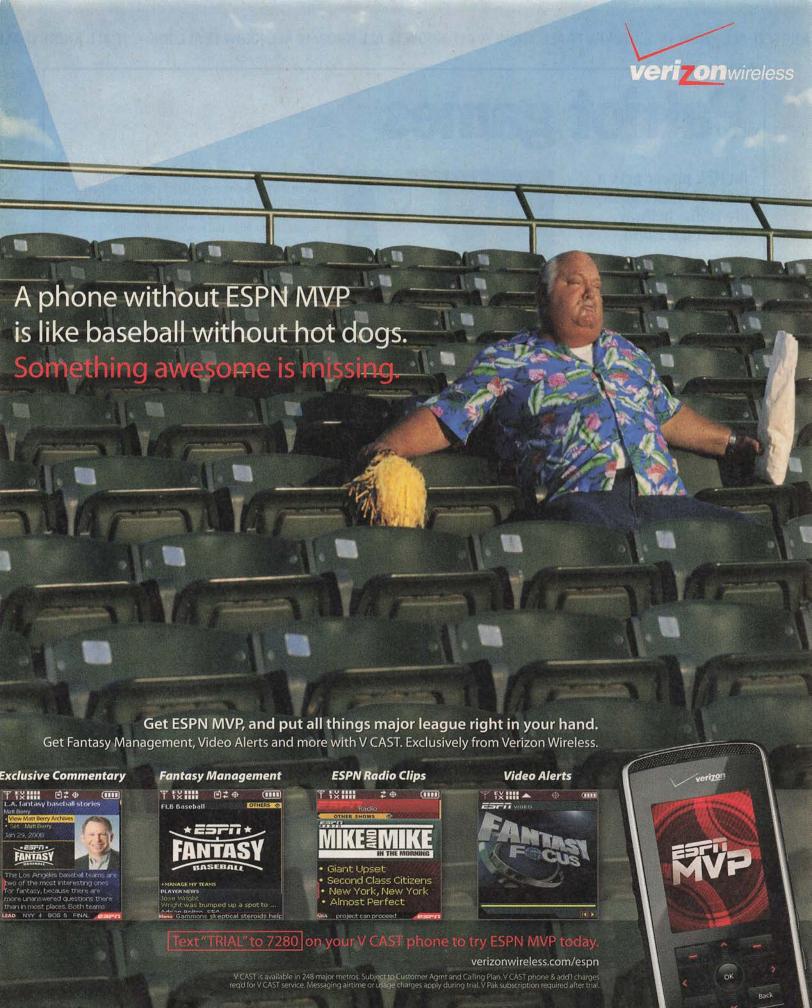
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Patriot games

An NFL player gets a taste of what military life is like halfway around the world

uis Castillo isn't about to equate the job of a football player with that of a soldier in combat. "They're risking their lives; we're just risking our limbs," he says. But at the same time, he can't help but notice commonalities.

Soldiers and gridders both train rigorously. They follow careful routines. They have specialized skills that are utilized in a team concept. And they are driven to be the best at what they do—their success depends on it.

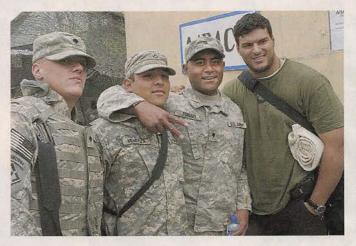
Maybe that's why football players connect so well with troops overseas. Castillo, a fourth-year end for the Chargers, joined Panthers end Mike Rucker, Bears defensive tackle Tommie Harris and Sports Illustrated writer Peter King on a weeklong USO Tour of Afghanistan and

Kyrgyzstan earlier this month. They talked plenty of football; many of the troops couldn't get enough of it. But the players were just as eager to hear stories of the battlefields, the camaraderie, the training. "It gets your blood flowing because you have such a respect for what they do," says Castillo.

And the aircraft, with all their gadgets, weapons and fancy computer systems? "We were like little kids with new toys on Christmas," Castillo says. —Mike Nahrstedt

One of the most enjoyable experiences for Castillo, shown here with soldiers shortly after landing at Kandahar Air Base in Afghanistan, was a late-night rap session in an Army Ranger's room at Kandahar. "One of their squad leaders was a guy from San Diego with a Charger bolt tattooed on his arm. Just an insane fan," he says. "We were in there for hours just listening to stories and them drilling us on football things."

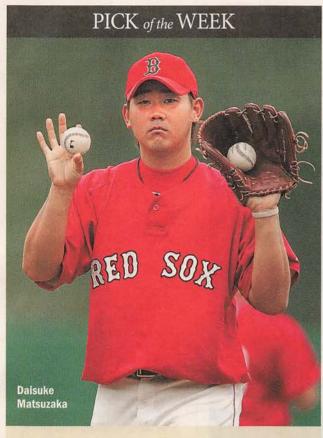
←The group flew from Kyrgyzstan, a small country where the tour began, and ended, to Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan in a C-17 cargo plane. Castillo was able to sit in a jump seat behind the pilots for the last 45 minutes of the flight. But he was told that with the seat came responsibility: He had to keep his eyes peeled for incoming missiles. The pilots weren't kidding; surface-to-air missiles are a threat to planes landing at Bagram. So Castillo was looking intensely out his side window when a voice came on his headset: "Missile locked. Missile locked. Initiate defense systems." Castillo started panicking, almost jumping out of his seat, but then noticed one of the pilots looking at him and chuckling. "Oh, my gosh," he says, "they got me."





At Jalalabad Air Base in Afghanistan, the NFL group went on a training mission in a Black Hawk helicopter. The pilots practiced "wheel touches," in which they landed on mountains with one wheel on the side of a rock and held steady for about 10 seconds-long enough for troops to unload. "When you look to the left and all you see is sky because the mountain drops right there, and you look to the right and you see yourself 2, 3, 4 feet above the ground on a 5,000-foot peak, that's pretty cool," Castillo says.

All times Eastern



TUE 25

A's vs. Red Sox (6 a.m., ESPN2). Seriously, the opening game of the baseball season is showing on the deuce? In Tokyo? This ain't your father's pastime, kids. At least the mound still is 60 feet, 6 inches from home plate. For now.

SAT 22 All right, you pulled off the first-round upset, but your Cinderella slippers aren't shipped until you make it through Round 2 of the NCAA Tournament (2 p.m., CBS).

Speaking of big things in the college world, the NCAA wrestling championships (8:30 p.m., ESPN) wrap up today in St. Louis. For the full effect, put on your heaviest sweats and find a sauna televising the grapplers in action.

SUN 23 Spurs at Mavericks (1 p.m., ABC). It might be tournament time, but the pros still matter deep in the heart of Texas.

World Golf Championships-CA Championship (3 p.m., NBC). Tiger's on. The total purse is \$8 million. You know what's going to happen, but you'll still watch. After all, Tiger's on.

WED 26 See the next great Georgetown big man, Greg Monroe, and B.J. Mullens, a future Buckeye, in the McDonald's All American game from Milwaukee (9:30 p.m., ESPN). Just about every other future NCAA star will be there, too. -Ryan Fagan

HILLEY

NCAA Tournament. I've sworn off bracket games, which really are gambling. Instead I'm getting into a really fun fantasy Texas Hold 'em league that Rick Neuheisel turned me on to.

Bud Selig. Did you see what he got paid last year? \$14.5 mil. \$14.5 mil! For that kind of money, I'd at least expect-what?-.220 and five homers.

D-Wade. He's out for the rest of the season. which is really going to hurt. In fact, the Heat's Q rating just slipped behind the Marlins, jai alai and mojito making.

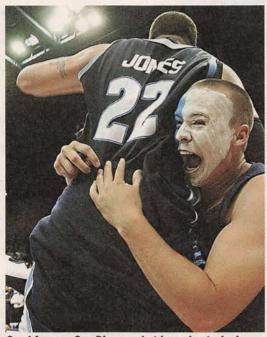
Spring roster cuts. You find guys you root for, like the Morgan kid with the Pirates. Played junior hockey, but his future's in baseball: plus arm, plus speed, plus teeth.

Pro days. A draft prospect's entire future rides on a tenth of a second in the 40. They're not lucky like us. whose futures ride on the whims of frustrated middle managers in HR.



It is unfair that conference tournament winners get an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament. A team should be rewarded for its season, not its conference tourney. - Jeremiah Knight, Greenville, N.C.

- I'm amazed that a current player is finally acknowledging that signing Barry Bonds could be a good thing for a team. It looks like Todd Jones (SN, March 10) has come to the same conclusion I did: Seattle seems to be the best fit. -aajoe7 via SportingNews.com
- Plain and simple, Barry Bonds is a cancer that needs to be cut out. I would not have him on my team, regardless of circumstance. I have too much respect for the game and its fans to sign an egotistical cheat. -knockahoma via SportingNews.com
- Whichever team drafts Matt Ryan (SN, March 10) has a sure franchise quarterback-not for the future but for right now. -REIGNBLOOD via SportingNews.com
- If Matt Ryan having "it" means having a weak arm, bad footwork and the tendency to flutter long passes by throwing off his back foot, you can have it. -3rdStone-FromTheSun via SportingNews.com
- Joakim Noah and Corey Brewer (SN, March 10) have no idea how to play basketball. Each time I see their shooting motion, I get a little nauseous. I have no idea how NBA scouts missed this little fact. It's hard to be an All-Star if you can't put the ball in the hole. -ShaunPhillips via SportingNews.com
- I guess not having one of the 12 best "snipers" in the NHL (SN, March 10) is a good thing, seeing as no Devils, Canadiens, Red Wings or Stars made the list and they are among the top teams in each conference. -tommytuna34 via e-mail



Good for you, San Diego ... but how about winning a few more during the regular season?

POLLING PLACE

What is your favorite part of the **NCAA Tournament?**

SPORTINGNEWS.COM MEMBERS

65% The first weekend

13% The regionals

22% The Final Four

SPORTING NEWS STAFF

64% The first weekend

12% The regionals

24% The Final Four

BLOG ON

From your blogs on sportingnews.com

RE: LET THE MADNESS BEGIN!

Posted by A.J.512

I am March Madness. I'm a college basketball bonanza, an advertising asset, a workplace distraction, a "calling in sick" rationalization, a moneymaker, a money taker and an all-around sports spectacular.

RE: A CONFESSION

Posted by sportsgoddess

I realize this could bring the wrath of Sporting News readers on me and that I might be exiled to the nether lands of sports fandom, but I have to say it. I can't hold it back any longer.

I don't care about March Madness.

There, I said it.

RE: BETRAYED

Posted by famar

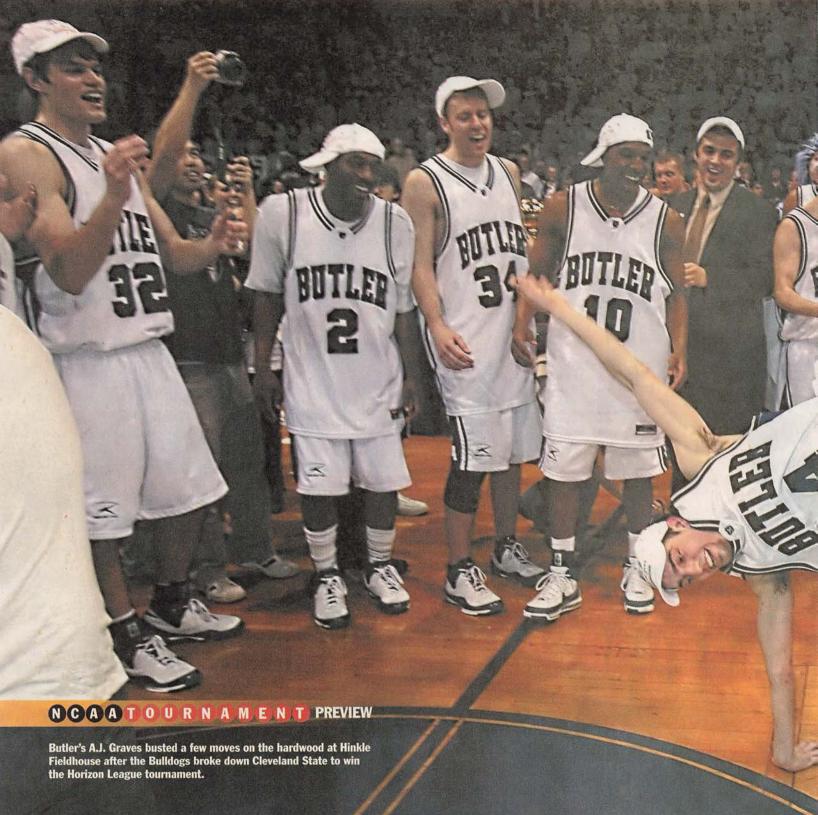
David Stern is to SuperSonics fans what Fredo was to Michael Corleone in The Godfather II. I mean, Clay Bennett's motives are easy to discern-he is a rich guy who wants a shiny, expensive toy and more money. As commissioner of the NBA, Stern should be doing everything in his power to guarantee the prestige and integrity of his league. Who does it serve, other than Bennett and his ownership group, to hijack the Sonics and move them to Oklahoma City?

RADIO*STAR

Real talk from a fan on Sporting News Radio

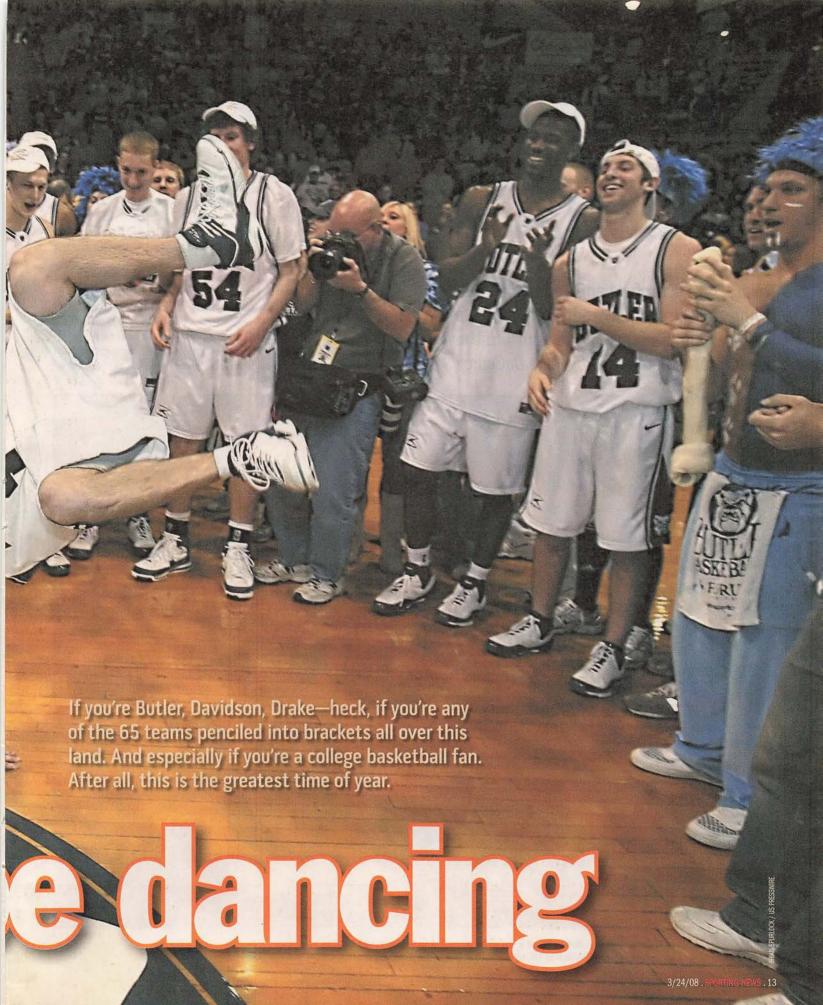
'If the Rockets can carry momentum into the playoffs and make a run without Yao Ming, that will be the story of the entire NBA season.' -Zack in Denver on the Arnie Spanier Show





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12 . SEE A DIFFERENT GAME . 3/24708



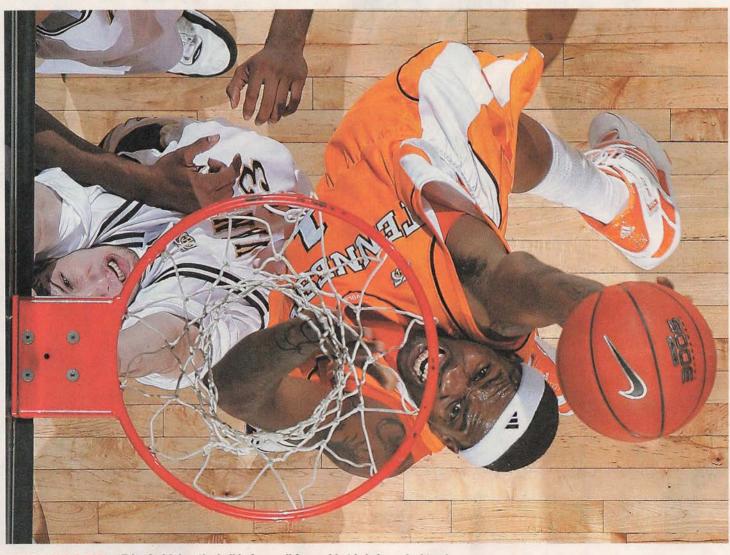
Unconventional wisdom

Texas, Duke, Stanford and Tennessee are trying to take the nontraditional route to San Antonio. So far, so good-but are they headed for a dead end? By Mike DeCourcy

e all know what a champion looks like because we all have TV. A champion looks like Emeka Okafor swatting down shots like houseflies. A champion looks like Sean May toying with overmatched post defenders. A champion looks like Jay Williams slicing through a defense as though he's armed with a Ginsu knife. A champion looks like Al Horford flexing his bulging biceps with every rebound he collects.

Few teams win the NCAA championship without possessing most of these qualities: physical power, low-post offensive skill, one or more scorers who can break down defenders and the capacity to guard the lane.

Sometimes, it seems D.J. Augustin can handle all of this himself for Texas. He is 6-0, 180 pounds, but every inch, every ounce of that is fortitude. Since the start of the season, when most of the Longhorns' big men either weren't healthy enough or ready enough to play at an elite level, he



Tyler Smith has the build of a small forward but is being asked to play power forward, which is OK by him-if it helps the Vols win it all.



Critics agree: the best fake drama about fake baseball ever.



"I'm at a loss for words. "" - ANGELA NARLOCH, SOAP TODAY

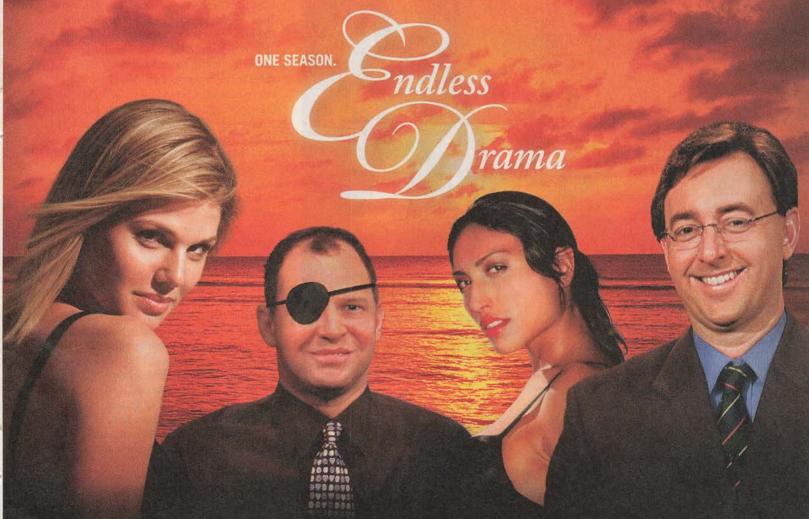
44 An ERAzor-sharp new drama with WHIP-smart dialogue, well-chiseled chin music and some serious bases-on-balls... the creators of 'Endless Drama' have thrown a perfect game. ""

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Augustin has become the best closer in college basketball since North Carolina's Phil Ford. has given Texas an immense presence in the lane despite his stature.

"We felt the best way to get some shots around the rim would be to keep the lane open and let D.J. get it to the rim," says coach Rick Barnes. "We looked at that as being our post game."



TEXAS

The Longhorns' post game on offense: Send Augustin to the basket and figure he'll get a layup, draw a foul or both.

Texas is one of four teams that have been dominant despite lacking some of the traditional components of an NCAA championship contender. As teams adjust to player losses—such as the departure of 2007 player of the year Kevin Durant—coaches must be more creative about how to win big while camouflaging obvious weaknesses.

The Longhorns are growing their inside game every day, as freshman Gary Johnson returns to form after missing two months because of health concerns and classmates Clint Chapman and Alexis Wangmene gradually develop. But given where those three players stand at the start of the NCAA Tournament, the most Barnes can expect of them is a few nice moments along the way.

We are accustomed to seeing Texas send out players as big as longhorns, beastly guys with brawn and bulk such as Brad Buckman and Jason Klotz. Going back to his days as coach at Providence and Clemson, it seems the only thing Rick Barnes loves as much as beating opponents is beating them up.

So what in the name of LaMarcus Aldridge is Texas doing with a big man who has attempted almost twice as many 3-pointers as free throws? That's 6-10 Connor Atchley, the Horns' most accurate long-distance shooter and much more of a threat as a jump shooter than a low-post scorer. He sets up most often beyond the top of the key, forcing opposing bigs to leave the lane to defend his 3-point shots. That allows Augustin more room to attack the rim.

"To me, that's no different than throwing it into a post guy," Barnes says. "D.J. is a big-time layup maker."

That's more profound than it seems. Every grade-school player has run through a layup line, but Augustin finishes from impossible angles, at remarkable speeds, against immense defenders. In the regular season, he scored 145 2-point baskets and attempted 190 free throws—comparable numbers to those of UCLA All-American center Kevin Love (159 2-pointers, 224 free throws).

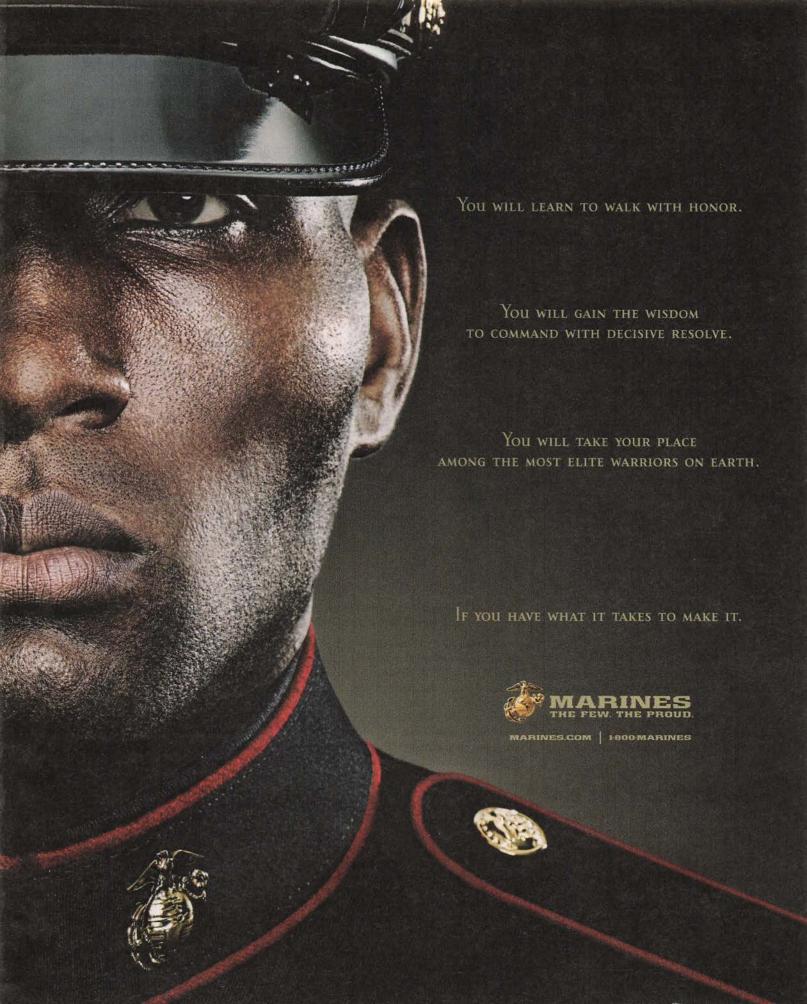
Most important, Augustin has become the best closer in college basketball since North Carolina's Phil Ford. When the Longhorns have a lead with 4 minutes left, they've won 25 of 26 games—because they hand control to Augustin, so gifted as a ballhandler that opponents can't steal it from him and so tough to keep out of the lane that he can drive and either score or draw a foul.

"I'm not always the fastest or the tallest player out there," Augustin says. "Sometimes, you've got to be smart."

Duke keeps punching

When Mike Krzyzewski uses a boxing analogy to describe the nature of this particular Duke team, he does not admit—only implies—the Blue Devils are middleweights.

Yeah, but really tough middleweights, like



Oscar De La Hoya.

"We're good. We've accomplished like we're really good," Krzyzewski says. "But we're like a fighter in a 10-round fight—we're going to have to dance around the ring, win six or seven rounds. If we knock anybody out, it'll be in the 10th round, and we're probably not going to knock many people out. Can we win the fight? I'm OK with that."

The two starters in Duke's frontcourt, Kyle Singler and Lance Thomas, are listed at 6-8, 220. Together, they average fewer rebounds than North Carolina All-American Tyler Hansbrough gets on his own. The Blue Devils grab only 0.5 rebounds more than their opponents, and that small advantage is the residue of playing several mid-majors in preconference games.

The Devils can inflict a lot of damage, though, by hanging outside and flicking jabs. They ring up 27.8 points per game on 3-point shots, almost a third of their offensive output. They make 38.4 percent of their attempts and rank 40th in accuracy among Division I teams.

It's dangerous to be so dependent on long-range shooting, but Duke tries to be judicious about the shots it takes, plays with a strong sense of will and defends the line exceptionally well. "This team is for real," assistant coach Steve Wojciechowski says.

Because the name on the jersey is Duke and because the record and ranking have been so impressive, people expect this team to be overwhelming. In fact, *annoying* is a better word. The Blue Devils can annoy an opponent until its corner is throwing in the towel.

"I still love my team. I don't think we're back yet to where I would like to be," Krzyzewski says. "But we're getting there. We may get knocked back a little bit more, but we've had a hell of a year. We're going to be in there somewhere."

Stanford goes big—really big

Starting 14 feet worth of Lopez makes Stanford different from most any team in college basketball, in this or any season.

Bigger. Longer. If the Lopez brothers stood adjacent to each other with their arms outstretched, they might be mistaken for the Golden Gate Bridge.

Thomas does his best inside but just doesn't have a power body.

But having a 7-foot center (Brook Lopez) and a 7-foot power forward (his twin brother, Robin) naturally makes coach Trent Johnson's squad a little less dynamic than many college teams. The Cardinal won't win many footraces, which is one reason he withdrew Robin from the lineup for a short period near the start of Pac-10 play. Another was Johnson's discomfort with the team's ability to control the basketball.

The Devils can inflict a lot of damage by hanging outside and flicking jabs.

Robin returned to the starting lineup so Stanford could match up against—or overmatch—California's excellent bigs Ryan Anderson and DeVon Hardin in an important late-January game. Robin grabbed his coach's attention by seizing 10 offensive rebounds and averaged 11.4 points, 5.3 rebounds and 2.4 blocks—combined with Brook's averages of 20.1 points, 8.1 rebounds and 2.7 blocks—in the last 12 games of the regular season. Stanford started that stretch 9-1 before ending the regular season with losses at UCLA and USC.

The Lopez brothers personify the term "tough matchup" because they make it such a challenge for opposing bigs to get a clean look at the goal. Anderson and UCLA's Love, both Sporting News All-Americans, shot a combined 20-of-56 and averaged 14.0 points in their games against Stanford.

What the Cardinal lack compared with most championship contenders is the ability to attack at the offensive and defensive ends. They average only 70.7 points and shoot only 44.9 percent, surprisingly low for a team fielding such a big lineup. They have to disguise a low level of creative ability on offense. They don't have an easy time manufacturing baskets and don't have the speed and quickness to take the ball from opponents and start fast breaks that way.

Ultimately, playing a smaller unit doesn't make Stanford all that much quicker or more athletic. This team doesn't have many of those kinds of players. But it has more Lopez brothers than anybody, and lately that has meant a lot.

Tennessee tries to man up

Tyler Smith transferred to Tennessee believing the Volunteers could contend for the national championship. He did not change his mind after discovering that he, at 6-7, 215, would be lining up at power forward.

"I figured we could get to the Final Four and cut down the nets," says Smith, who transferred from Iowa and was granted immediate eligibility because his father, now deceased, was ill with lung cancer. "We still can win it all. I think we can man up. As the season progresses, we're just getting better and better."

Tennessee's lineup does not feature a traditional

They don't look the part

These unconventional teams—some might call them a flawed four—are markedly different from the past five tournament champs.

Texas

Area for concern: Lack of post offense

Team field goal percentage: 45.4 Last five champs: 49.6

Duke

Area for concern: Reliance on perimeter offense

Blue Devils' 3-point production: 33.1 percent of points

Last five champs: 25.4 percent of points

Stanford

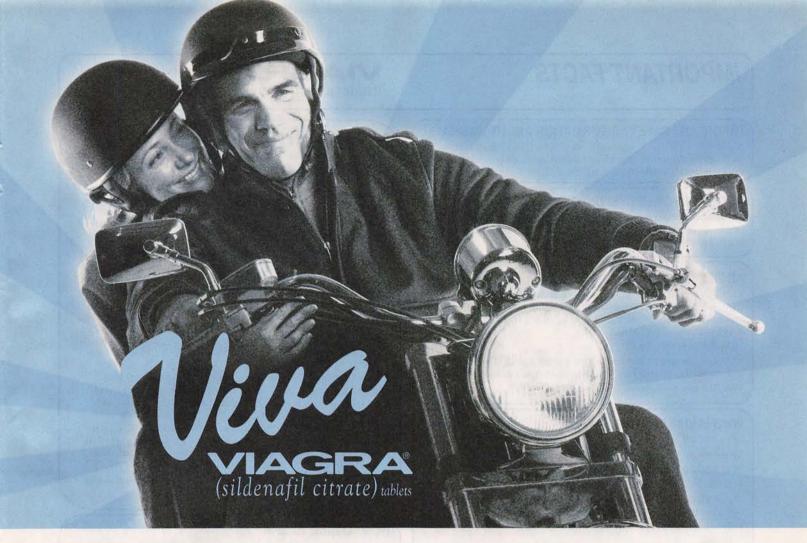
Area for concern: Lack of defensive speed

Cardinal's steals: 4.4 per game Last five champs: 7.7 per game

Tennessee

Area for concern: Struggles to defend the goal

Volunteers' blocks: 3.4 per game Last five champs: 5.8 per game



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The most common side effects of VIAGRA are headache, facial flushing, and upset stomach. Less common are bluish or blurred vision, or being sensitive to light. These may occur for a brief time.

Remember to protect yourself and your partner from sexually transmitted diseases.

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IMPORTANT FACTS



(vi-AG-rah)

IMPORTANT SAFETY INFORMATION ABOUT VIAGRA

Never take VIAGRA if you take any medicines with nitrates. This includes nitroglycerin. Your blood pressure could drop quickly. It could fall to an unsafe or life-threatening level.

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Erectile dysfunction means a man cannot get or keep an erection. Health problems, injury, or side effects of drugs may cause ED. The cause may not be known.

ABOUT VIAGRA

VIAGRA is used to treat ED in men. When you want to have sex, VIAGRA can help you get and keep an erection when you are sexually excited. You cannot get an erection just by taking the pill. Only your doctor can prescribe VIAGRA.

VIAGRA does not cure ED.

VIAGRA does not protect you or your partner from STDs (sexually transmitted diseases) or HIV. You will need to use a condom.

VIAGRA is not a hormone or an aphrodisiac

WHO IS VIAGRA FOR?

Who should take VIAGRA?

Men who have ED and whose heart is healthy enough for sex Who should NOT take VIAGRA?

- If you ever take medicines with nitrates:
 - Medicines that treat chest pain (angina), such as nitroglycerin or isosorbide mononitrate or dinitrate
- · If you use some street drugs, such as "poppers" (amyl nitrate or nitrite)
- If you are allergic to anything in the VIAGRA tablet.

BEFORE YOU START VIAGRA

Tell your doctor if you have or ever had:

- · Heart attack, abnormal heartbeats, or stroke
- · Heart problems, such as heart failure, chest pain, or aortic valve narrowing
- Low or high blood pressure
- Severe vision loss
- An eye condition called retinitis pigmentosa
- Kidney or liver problems
- Blood problems, such as sickle cell anemia or leukemia
- · A deformed penis, Peyronie's disease, or an erection that lasted more than 4 hours
- · Stomach ulcers or any kind of bleeding problems

Tell your doctor about all your medicines. Include over-the-counter medicines, vitamins, and herbal products. Tell your doctor if you take or use:

- · Medicines called alpha-blockers to treat high blood pressure or prostate problems. Your blood pressure could suddenly get too low. You could get dizzy or faint. Your doctor may start you on a lower dose of VIAGRA.
- Medicines called protease inhibitors for HIV. Your doctor may prescribe a 25 mg dose. Your doctor may limit VIAGRA to 25 mg in a 48-hour period.
- Other methods to cause erections. These include pills, injections, implants, or pumps.

POSSIBLE SIDE EFFECTS OF VIAGRA

Side effects are mostly mild to moderate. They usually go away after a few hours. Some of these are more likely to happen with higher doses.

The most common side effects are:

Feeling flushed

Upset stomach

Less common side effects are:

Headache

- Trouble telling blue and green apart or seeing a blue tinge on things
- Eyes being more sensitive to light
 Blurred vision

Rarely, a small number of men taking VIAGRA have reported these serious events:

- Having an erection that lasts more than 4 hours. If the erection is not treated right away, long-term loss of potency could occur.
- Sudden decrease or loss of sight in one or both eyes. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. They may be caused by conditions like high blood pressure or diabetes. If you have sudden vision changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Sudden decrease or loss of hearing. We do not know if these events are caused by VIAGRA and medicines like it or caused by other factors. If you have sudden hearing changes, stop using VIAGRA and all medicines like it. Call your doctor right away.
- Heart attack, stroke, irregular heartbeats, and death. We do not know whether these events are caused by VIAGRA or caused by other factors. Most of these happened in men who already had heart problems.

If you have any of these problems, stop VIAGRA. Call your doctor right away.

HOW TO TAKE VIAGRA

- Take VIAGRA only the way your doctor tells you. VIAGRA comes in 25 mg, 50 mg, and 100 mg tablets. Your doctor will tell you how much to take.
- If you are over 65 or have serious liver or kidney problems, your doctor may start you at the lowest dose (25 mg).
- Take VIAGRA about 1 hour before you want to have sex. VIAGRA starts to work in about 30 minutes when you are sexually excited VIAGRA lasts up to 4 hours.

Don't:

- Do not take VIAGRA more than once a day.
- · Do not take more VIAGRA than your doctor tells you. If you think you need more VIAGRA, talk with your doctor.
- Do not start or stop any other medicines before checking with vour doctor.

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NCAATOURNAMENT PREVIEW

center. Wayne Chism is big enough, 6-9 and 242 pounds, but does his most effective offensive work on the perimeter. He has blocked 68 shots in his two-year career. That was a good fortnight for Okafor at UConn.

The Volunteers' best defense is a pressure scheme that wears down opponents and frequently forces turnovers. Overall, though, Tennessee allows opponents to shoot 43.2 percent from the field, certainly on the high end for a team that fashions itself a title contender. The biggest reasons for that number: too few blocks and too many offensive rebounds allowed.

The Vols are improving as rebounders, at least. Their numbers were better against league opponents than

preconference foes. That's largely because Chism "got to the point where I got tired of getting in trouble. A 6-9 dude playing in the paint not getting any rebounds? What are you going to hear from coach? You don't want to go sit on the bench because you're not rebounding."

Tennessee's offense is uncommon, as well; it depends on Smith to cause matchup problems for power forwards who can't deal with his ballhandling skill, Chism to hit perimeter jump shots when centers

If the Lopez brothers stood adjacent to each other with their arms outstretched, they might be mistaken for the Golden Gate Bridge.

guarding him lose focus and any number of capable guards to hit 3s.

In the road victory that spoiled Memphis' unbeaten season, though, Chism surprised nearly everyone by setting himself up in the low post, squaring himself to

accept an entry pass and tossing in a picturesque jump

The Vols appear unconventional now. Perhaps by the end of all this, they'll look like every other NCAA champion.

STANFORD

The Cardinal have become more difficult to defend and score on inside since the Lopez twins, Robin (left) and Brook, began starting together.

The magic number

How many teams are capable of winning the six NCAA Tournament games required to claim the championship? Well, it's at least six:

1 UCLA. The Bruins—most of them—have Final Four experience and the qualities necessary to win it all. They've got inside power from Kevin Love and perimeter quickness with Darren Collison and Russell Westbrook. But their shooting is a little spotty, and their offense can stagnate.

2 Kansas. No team has more of what's needed to win the championship: perimeter speed, shooting, post scoring, inside depth, dynamic point guard play and a great defense.

Memphis. The Tigers have game-breaking players in Derrick Rose and Chris Douglas-Roberts. If only they could get a consistent effort from Joey Dorsey.

Aborth Carolina. Tyler Hansbrough dominates games but doesn't get a lot of help down low. Plus, defense is an issue and Ty Lawson still might not be at his best.

Texas. This team is imbalanced toward the backcourt—but what a backcourt. It's hard to come from behind when D.J. Augustin and A.J. Abrams are protecting the ball and making free throws, and no lead is safe with them firing 3s.

6 Louisville. Point guard Edgar Sosa, who is essential to success, is easily discouraged. Perimeter shooting can be streaky. But when the ball frequently is finding its way to 6-8 matchup nightmare Earl Clark, the Cards can be devastating.

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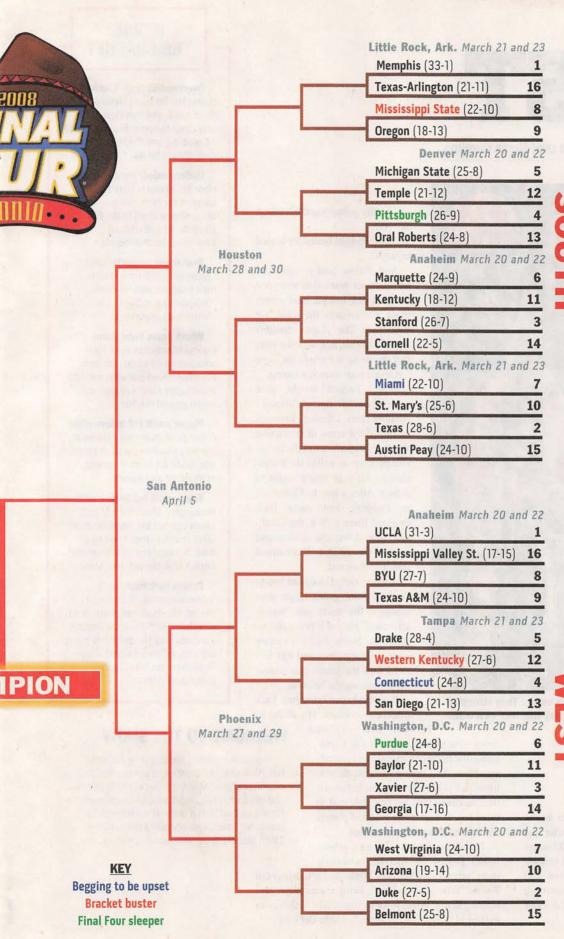
NCAATOURNAMENT PREVIEW Raleigh, N.C. March 21 and 23 1 North Carolina (32-2) 16 *MSMU (18-14) / Coppin St. (16-20) 8 Indiana (25-7) 9 Arkansas (22-11) Denver March 20 and 22 5 Notre Dame (24-7) 12 George Mason (23-10) 4 Washington State (24-8) 13 Winthrop (22-11) Charlotte Birmingham, Ala. March 21 and 23 March 27 and 29 6 Oklahoma (22-11) 11 St. Joseph's (21-12) 3 Louisville (24-8) 14 Boise State (25-8) Birmingham, Ala. March 21 and 23 7 Butler (29-3) 10 South Alabama (26-6) 2 Tennessee (29-4) 15 American (21-11) San Antonio April 5 Omaha, Neb. March 20 and 22 1 Kansas (31-3) 16 Portland State (23-9) 8 UNLV (26-7) 9 Kent State (28-6) Tampa March 21 and 23 5 Clemson (24-9) 12 Villanova (20-12) 4 Vanderbilt (26-7) 13 Siena (22-10) San Antonio Detroit Omaha, Neb. March 20 and 22 April 7 March 28 and 30 6 USC (21-11) 11 Kansas State (20-11) 3 Wisconsin (29-4) 14 Cal State Fullerton (24-8) Raleigh, N.C. March 21 and 23 7 Gonzaga (25-7)

*Opening-round game March 18 in Dayton, Ohio

22 . SEE A DIFFERENT GAME . 3/24/08

10 Davidson (26-6)

2 Georgetown (27-5) 15 UMBC (24-8)



THE TRUCK THAT'S CHANGING IT ALL.





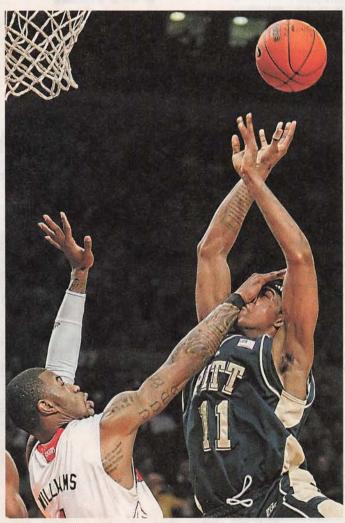


Vehicle shown with optional equipment. ©2008 Toyota Motor Sales, U.S.A., Inc.

Region strength

1 FAST

DeCourcy's pick Louisville over North Carolina



Williams says the Cardinals finally faced the music: They struggled early because they were selfish and didn't play together as a team.

These Cardinals only fly together

It wasn't especially jolly around Louisville as the Christmas holiday approached. Derrick Caracter was sequestered in what must have been an XXL-sized doghouse. Rick Pitino had publicly declared himself "disappointed" in his gifted sophomore class and admitted some players were more interested in scoring than winning. The Cardinals were getting along about as well as the Lohans.

Two things happened to make it all better.

David Padgett healed, or healed enough.

And Pitino finally convinced his fractious team that everyone involved did, indeed, have something in common: their love for basketball. The players couldn't argue with that, nor with the logic that the game is a whole lot more fun when your team is winning.

When Padgett fought back faster than his doctors thought possible from a broken kneecap, he brought a sense of conviction about the importance of the Louis-ville program as well as the leader-ship a fifth-year senior ought to deliver. After a loss to Cincinnati in Padgett's first game back dropped them to 9-4, the Cardinals tore down the stretch and entered the NCAA Tournament with a 24-8 record.

After an early December loss to Dayton, point guard Edgar Sosa admitted the team was "underachieving." He still is prone to that affliction. Sosa's 1-of-9 shooting against Georgetown and Pitt factored into the team's consecutive losses entering the NCAAs.

If anybody can bring him back quickly, it is Pitino. His ability to

win over-or wear

down—his players returned the Cardinals to the ranks of national title contenders. Pitino had gotten through to selfinterested players before (think Antoine Walker, circa 1996) but this time had to bring together an entire group of players who obviously were disconnected.

"He brings it back to what got you here.

It isn't playing for yourself, jacking up shots," says forward Terrence Williams, the man they call

T-Will. "What got you here is being a team player and wanting to win. When you win, you go a lot farther as an individual than you do by losing." —Mike DeCourcy

INSIDE THE BRACKET

Overseeded: North Carolina. Of course the Tar Heels deserve a No. 1 seed, and they deserve to play close to home. But UCLA, with 14 wins against the field to UNC's nine, should be No. 1 overall.

Underseeded: Indiana. It was clear the Hoosiers would get spanked for their recent collapse, but dropping them to the 8-9 game could give UNC an interesting second-rounder.

Best draw: Louisville. The Cardinals match up well with their potential second-round (Oklahoma) and Sweet 16 (Tennessee) opponents.

Worst draw: Notre Dame. George Mason has Final Four veterans on its roster; the Irish have first-round exit veterans. And Washington State's rugged style would ground the Irish.

Player you'll fall in love with: Butler point guard Mike Green is the only player in the tournament who leads his team in scoring, rebounding and assists.

Team you'll fall in love with: Washington State. The Cougars haven't gotten the attention most other teams in their seed range have, but guards Kyle Weaver and Derrick Low can put on a show.

Dream matchup: No. 2
Tennessee vs. No. 3 Louisville
(Sweet 16). Both can press. Both
can shoot. Both have charismatic
coaches. Only Louisville has a true
big man in David Padgett. Only
Tennessee has Tyler Smith, a
matchup nightmare.

WELCOME TO THE SHOW

American launched the coaching career of Gary Williams, who went on to win the national championship at Maryland. But not until this year had the Eagles reached the NCAA Tournament. Their appearance is a redemption of sorts for coach Jeff Jones, who directed Virginia to the 1995 Elite Eight but was fired three years later.

2 MIDWEST

DeCourcy's pick Kansas over USC

Kansas' bad history is history

Mention Kansas. Then duck.

KU has one of the great college basketball histories: Wilt Chamberlain, Danny Manning, Paul Pierce and Kirk Hinrich; two national championships; the classic beauty of Allen Fieldhouse.

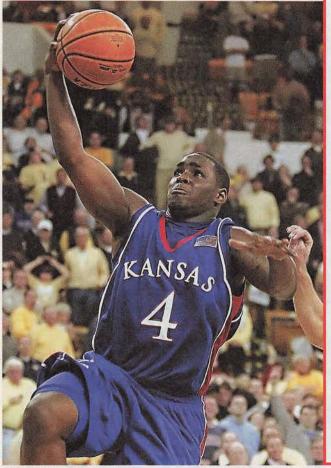
And recently, the Jayhawks have been among the elite programs consistently. Seniors Russell Robinson, Sasha Kaun and Darnell Jackson have been part of four consecutive Big 12 regular-season championships. Juniors Brandon Rush and Mario Chalmers have been around for three and have won 84 percent of their college games.

So how come all anybody wants to remember is a couple of first-round NCAA Tournament losses? Bucknell and Bradley. This program is so much more than that. This team is so much more—especially now that sophomore point guard Sherron Collins is figuring out exactly what is needed of him.

These Jayhawks meandered through February awaiting the challenges of March. Coach Bill Self was visibly disappointed after an early-February loss at Texas, but the result was less of an issue than the reality KU had not presented its best effort in one of its few marquee challenges during the regular season. It was not easy for him to acknowledge the Jayhawks had been "outmanned" down the stretch.

Like last year's Florida Gators—but different, because they don't already own a title—these Jayhawks understood they would be defined by their tournament performance. They could have won every game in the Big 12 and still encountered doubt regarding their tournament heritage, and that knowledge might have been one element contributing to what coach Self confirmed was a series of substandard performances.

As the tournament approached, however, KU again demonstrated the taste for dominance that was evident when the year began. The Jayhawks' final six victories were by an average of 19.2 points.



Collins' emergence on offense makes the balanced Jayhawks even more difficult to defend.

The greatest difference in that period, aside from enhanced motivation, was Collins' progression as the team's offensive force. His attacks on the lane wrecked defenses and empowered teammates.

Self always has believed that properly harnessing Collins' energy—and unleashing that power upon opponents—would be the key element in KU's championship pursuit. At last comfortable after an early-season foot injury, Collins played his best games at the start of this month. That's when the history of these Jayhawks truly began. —M.D.

INSIDE THE BRACKET

Overseeded: Kent State. The Golden Flashes are by far the least accomplished single-digit seed in the tournament.

Underseeded: Wisconsin. Sure, the Big Ten was down this year, but is a No. 3 seed where the regular-season and tournament champs should wind up?

Best draw: Kansas. The deep, talented, top-seeded Jayhawks might not even break a sweat the first weekend.

Worst draw: Clemson. Hey Tigers, your reward for that fantastic run in the ACC Tournament is a date with Villanova, a hot team from the Big East, the country's toughest conference.

Player you'll fall in love with: Gritty Clemson senior Cliff Hammonds is a max-effort guard playing with a broken wrist on his nonshooting hand.

Team you'll fall in love with:
Davidson. You've got to respect a school with an enrollment of 1,700 that schedules North Carolina, UCLA and Duke on its nonconference slate. And scares the heck out of them, to boot. You've probably heard about Wildcats guard Stephen Curry, but maybe you haven't seen him.
Watch him against Gonzaga.

Dream matchup: No. 6 USC vs. No. 3 Wisconsin (second round). The Trojans and Badgers both throw down on defense. USC has better athletes; Wisconsin executes more consistently.

-Ryan Fagan

WELCOME TO THE SHOW

Jeremiah Dominguez's stature is small; his game isn't. He checks in at 5-6, but in his first year with Portland State, he guided the Vikings to their first NCAA Tournament berth. Dominguez led the squad in scoring, assists and steals and was named the Big Sky player of the year. —R.F.

Region strength

3WEST

DeCourcy's pick UCLA over Xavier

UCLA often trails, rarely fails

There were 52 other games played on the day UCLA opened the Pac-10 tournament with a comfortable victory over California, so it was easy to miss what could have been the most significant score of the day:

UCLA 39, Cal 25.

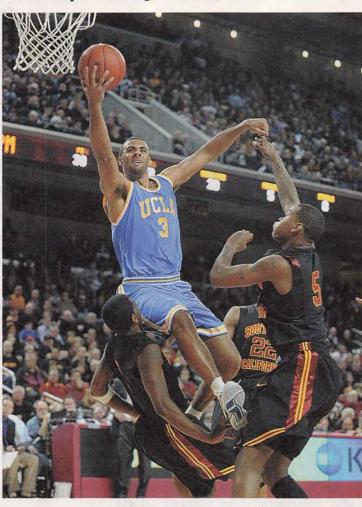
That was how things stood at halftime, and that is the team the Bruins need to become if they are to achieve their third consecutive Final Four appearance and claim their 12th NCAA championship.

As they slogged determinedly to a third straight Pac-10 regular-season title, they stumbled from the gate in nearly every game with a stagnant offense that did not correspond to their abundance of weapons. They had to rally from halftime deficits in three of their final five regular-season games and in those five games averaged 29.8 points in the first half compared with 41.6 after the break.

It might be easier to get things moving now that the

Bruins have escaped into the NCAAs. Once a free-flowing, end-to-end, not-much-D league, the Pac-10 is one headlock removed from a UFC cage match. That revolution began when the Bru-

ins hired defensive demon Ben Howland as their coach and has continued with the arrivals of Tim Floyd at USC and Herb Sendek at Arizona State and with Kevin O'Neill's year at Arizona.



The Bruins may be headed for trouble if Shipp doesn't find his touch from outside—he shot 36.4 percent in the team's last six games.

For the Bruins, though, the problem has been getting started on the other end of the floor. A big part of the concern is wing Josh Shipp, who stumbled into an 8-of-47 3-point shooting slump over

WELCOME TO THE SHOW

Here's hoping Kevin Love has as big an impact on the NCAA Tournament as he did on the Pac-10's reputation as an elite basketball conference. And here's hoping he follows in the footsteps of North Carolina's Tyler Hansbrough and doesn't jump to the NBA right away. -R.F.

INSIDE THE BRACKET

Overseeded: Duke. The Blue Devils were just 5-4 in their final nine games and lost in the ACC semifinals, not a typical finishing push for a No. 2.

Underseeded: Georgia. Let's step out on a limb and say a 14 seed is the lowest ever for a champion of a big-money conference tournament.

Best draw: Connecticut. The Huskies won't have to face a team from a power league until the second weekend. We'll see how that rough-and-tumble Big East slate prepared the Huskies to face hungry mid-majors.

Worst draw: Purdue. The baby Boilers were one of the feel-good stories of the season. Too bad they face the feel-good story of the decade, Baylor, in the first round.

Player you'll fall in love with: West Virginia was just a pretty good team before Joe Alexander

caught fire down the stretch, averaging 24.9 points as the Mountaineers won six of their final eight games.

Team you'll fall in love with:
Baylor. In five short years, coach
Scott Drew has transformed the
Bears from an utter disaster to a
tournament team with a handful of
elite athletes who can run and gun
with the best of them.

Dream matchup: No. 1 UCLA vs. No. 2 Duke (regional final). East meets West in a battle between the Bruins' athleticism and the Blue Devils' execution.

-R.F.

the final 10 games of the regular season. Without a functioning jumper, Shipp only occasionally was able to contribute as a

scorer.

Shipp proclaimed it a "new season" after hitting three of his six 3-pointers in that tourney win over Cal. But his production slipped in the semifinals

and finals. Point guard Darren Collison covered by averaging 20.5 points, but Collison appears intent on exploring every other option on the team before taking over games. By the time he's done with that, the Bruins frequently find themselves needing another comeback. —*M.D.*

Region strength

450UTH

DeCourcy's pick Texas over Memphis

Dorsey has shut up now he needs to put up

When Memphis center Joey Dorsey last appeared in the NCAA Tournament, he certainly had a lot to say. He promised a 20-rebound night. He called himself "Goliath" and his opponent "the little man." He called himself "an underrated big man" and the other guy "a lot overrated as a big man."

Then Dorsey disappeared in the shadow cast by Ohio State center Greg Oden, who was on his way to the national title game and the distinction of going No. 1 in the NBA draft.

When the inevitable happened and Oden blew Dorsey off the court in the NCAA South Region final, many in the media interpreted the result as Oden's response to all that hot air. In fact, it was merely Oden demonstrating the vast disparity in their abilities. There's nobody who's that much better than Dorsey now, but he promises he won't gamble with such foolishness this time around.

"That was a stage that I'd never been on before, and I wanted the exposure for myself," Dorsey says. I wasn't feeling the pressure. It was that I wanted it all on me, not on my teammates. Now it's different. I've grown up."

If coach John Calipari could trust that last statement, he could look at this tournament and know his Tigers could claim their school's first championship. But can he? Dorsey is a 6-9, 265-pound force with limited scoring skill but astonishing athleticism and power that allow him to function as an elite defender and rebounder.

His performances, though, are as predictable as an '82 Chevette. Big game against Georgetown: 11 points, 13 rebounds, impressive Tigers victory. Big

game against Tennessee: one point, six rebounds, disappointing Tigers loss. His teammates know to expect the unexpected and, when they see him going through the motions in pregame warmups, will try to draw another overpowering effort from him.

"You've just got to keep him focused, say positive things to make him feel better about

himself—so he won't get so down about himself," power forward Robert Dozier says. "When he's out there and he's playing hard, you see what kind of difference it makes."—M.D.



There's no question Dorsey can play—when he wants to.

WELCOME TO THE SHOW

Mississippi State point guard Jamont Gordon has scored 1,529 points, grabbed 655 rebounds and passed for 470 assists in his career. So he has done pretty much everything for the Bulldogs, and now he has carried them to the NCAA Tournament. And *carried* is not a word used lightly. He might be the single most important player on any tournament team.

INSIDE THE BRACKET

Overseeded: Oregon. The Ducks probably didn't belong in the field over Arizona State—a close call, for sure—and their No. 9 seed gives them the illusion of having made it comfortably.

Underseeded: Temple. The Owls have an almost identical profile to Saint Joseph's—and they beat the Hawks twice. So how does Temple get shipped to Denver as a 12 while Saint Joe's is one spot better and closer to home?

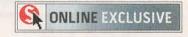
Best draw: Texas has a much easier road to the round of 16 than top-seeded Memphis, and once there the Longhorns should be greeted by a legion of UT fans at Houston's Reliant Stadium.

Worst draw: Michigan State gets no first-round bargain in its 5-12 matchup with Temple, and the second round presumably would bring rugged Pittsburgh. After that, it's 33-1 Memphis.

Player you'll fall in love with: Texas All-American point guard D.J. Augustin leaves you breathless with his creative shots and deft control of the basketball.

Team you'll fall in love with: Who's to say if Kentucky will be around long, but the Wildcats have played with incredible heart the past couple months. After a humiliating start, they rallied. After losing their most gifted player, Patrick Patterson, they rallied again.

Dream matchup: No. 1 Memphis vs. No. 2 Texas (region final). These are two of the five best teams in the country. Who wouldn't want to see them get together?



Join us on the road to San Antonio.

We'll have live scores, blogs and analysis from writers around the country—and matchups of every NCAA Tournament game—at sportingnews.com.

The Alle Elle Elle Way?

If Travis Hafner gets back in the swing of things, the Indians could make a run at ending Cleveland's championship drought. Trouble is, they play in the best darned league in baseball. By Sean Deveney

ut beyond the right field bleachers at the Indians' spring home, Chain of Lakes Park in Winter Haven, Fla., there's a steady thwacking of wood on ball. But the assembled mass of fans can't quite make out the source.

The batting cages are covered, made of corrugated steel painted blue, and the accompanying batting practice chatter ("Good," "A few more") is clipped and vague. But the sound from the cage is crunching, imposing, like the sound of Godzilla's foot on some hapless Tokyo skyscraper, and, looking at the Cleveland roster, only one conclusion can be logically drawn. When a small

boy standing outside the shuttered cage looks up and asks, "Dad, who's in there hitting?" the answer comes back, "Probably Travis Hafner."

Yes, it is Hafner, and the guy's not very happy these days. His Indians ended last season on a

bummer note, losing the American League Championship Series by one dang game. They won 102 games total, but it was the failure to win No. 103 that left the team writhing all winter, trying to figure out what could be done to get that one extra win against the defending World Series champion Red Sox or another of the A.L. elites who shuffled their decks with All-Star-caliber additions—like the Tigers, Mariners or Angels. The Indians opted to give it another go with essentially the same roster, which only puts more pressure on their players.

That includes Hafner, already one of the more intense dudes in baseball. But this year's intensity figures to increase significantly, and it started in the offseason. That's because for reasons he still can't quite explain, Hafner never really felt like himself last season, and the numbers he produced reflect that. From 2004-06, Hafner was a machine, the anchor of the Indians' lineup who batted .311, .305 and .308, with slugging percentages of .583, .595 and .659. He was among the most feared hitters in baseball and, more important, among the most consistent. Hafner was almost slump-proof—he hit at least .270 in 14 of 17 months and .300 in 11 of

Photo by Albert Dickson / SN

Full-page team

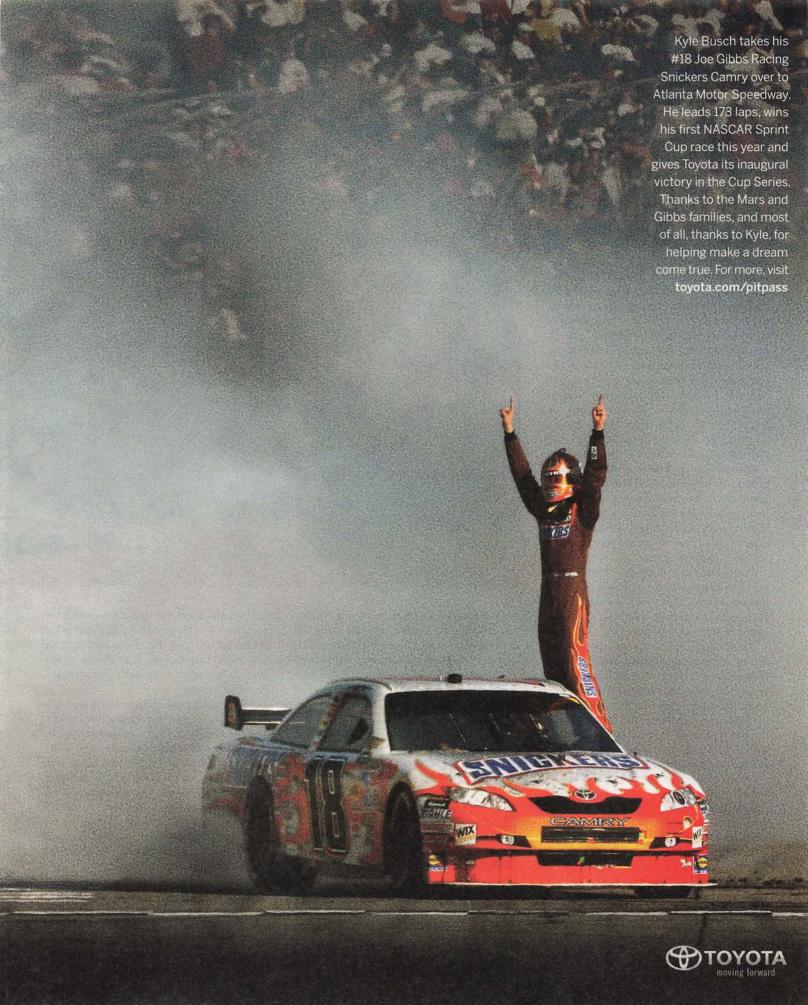
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on page 38.





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But 2007 was different. Hafner hit .228 in May, .218 in June. He finished at .266, with a .451 slugging percentage. It was the worst slump of his pro career.

"It just happened, and as it was happening, I kept thinking I could break out of it," Hafner says. "I did not think I was really doing anything wrong. I've just gone forward without really thinking about it."

Hafner did plenty of thinking about it last year. He's a devotee to detail, a player who keeps a hitting journal and studies video meticulously. But there wasn't anything in his journal about a slump like the one he was enduring.

He knew the symptoms: As a lefty hitter, he was struggling to drive doubles and homers on a line to right-center field, his strong suit, and was hitting too many easy pop flies. But the cure escaped him. He tried focusing on hitting to the opposite field. He tried being more intense in batting practice. He received advice from every schmo who ever picked up a piece of ash—and many who hadn't. At the depth of Hafner's slump, manager Eric Wedge even sat him against some lefties. Last July, in the midst of the slump, Hafner signed a four-year, \$65 million contract extension. Not even that snapped him out of it.

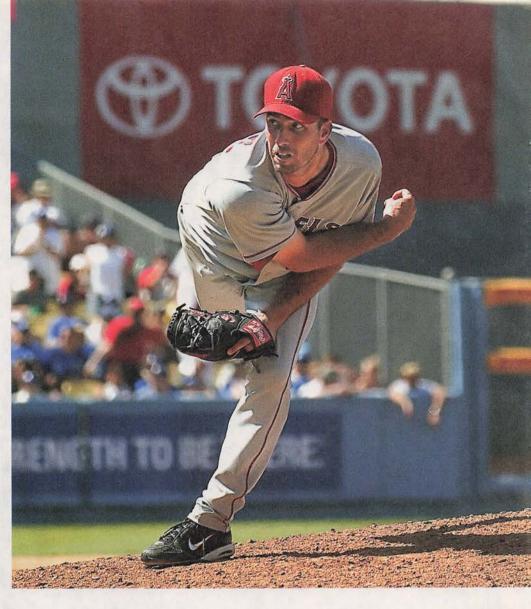
Now, with last year filed away, all Wedge can do is shrug. He knows how hard Hafner works, how extensively he searched for ways to get his swing back together. "There's nothing I'm going to say to him he hasn't said to himself," Wedge says. "He doesn't have to make up for last year. Having an off-year is absolutely normal."

That is Hafner's final analysis of '07—it happened, it's over, he's moving on. But, in stacking up the race in the A.L. Central and in sorting out how the Indians fit among the best teams in baseball, Hafner becomes the focal point.

If the Indians need to win one more game, it's easy to assume they'll expect Hafner to have enough thump in his bat to ensure that it happens. Despite his struggles, the Indians still won 96 games last season—tied with Boston for most in the big leagues. And even with Hafner running completely aground in the ALCS—he hit .148 with 12 strikeouts in 27 at-bats—Cleveland was still just one game away.

"That's an important factor in terms of how we looked at our offseason," says Indians general manager Mark Shapiro. "We needed to win one more game and we were in the World Series. If you're looking for upside to our team, if you're looking for how we're going to get better, start with Travis. He works very, very hard. And I think he's worked too hard this offseason to have anything like last year repeat itself."

That's not to say Hafner didn't work hard after the 2006 season. But he was so eager to put last year out of his mind that he cut short his offseason and began working with hitting coach Derek Shel-



ton at Jacobs Field in December, trying to locate that unidentifiable comfort with his swing. He thinks he has found it. On one bright spring afternoon in early March, Hafner drove a double off Mets starter Oliver Perez, then followed with another double that screamed over the glove of center fielder Angel Pagan. Two days later, he collected a pair of hard singles.

Now *that* is Travis Hafner. He smiles and says, "I've been feeling pretty good." If he feels pretty good all year, coming up with one more win might not be all that difficult for the Indians.

ook up and down the Indians' roster and the names are familiar. Eight of nine regular positions (all but left field) figure to be filled by the same players who filled them in Cleveland's final game of 2007. The rotation is the same, except for the No. 5 spot. The bullpen is the same, except for the addition of Japanese reliever Masa Kobayashi. But just try suggesting to Shapiro that he had himself a heels-on-the-desk kind of offseason.

"No way," he says. "I think what people don't

understand is, we were in on discussions for every major trade that happened this winter, except the (Johan) Santana trade. But, for us, making those deals would have required us to give up players from our big league roster as well as prospects, and it just didn't make sense."

Shapiro didn't think his team was in need of a tear-down—if the goal was one more win, he kept the emphasis on one. The Indians entered the offseason interested in adding a starter and a power hitter. They discussed pitcher Dan Haren and, later, Erik Bedard. They had a shot at slugger Miguel Cabrera. They let Nick Swisher pass. When dealing time came, Cleveland did not want to give up minor league prospects, plus the two players who emerged last August to help drive the team's playoff push: second baseman Asdrubal Cabrera and outfielder Franklin Gutierrez.

Shapiro opted for patience and taking his chances on allowing the team to improve from within. Still, a move could be made in the coming weeks, especially if surplus young infield talent like Andy Marte and Josh Barfield shines this spring.

The beefed-up Angels hope Shields holds up

The Angels entered the offseason flush with cash and eager to manufacture enough wins to ensure October success among a tough American League crowd.

They started by ousting too-cautious general manager Bill Stoneman, then handed out a \$90 million contract to free-agent center fielder Torii Hunter and acquired starting pitcher Jon Garland from the White Sox for shortstop Orlando Cabrera. The moves made this team significantly better than the one that easily won the A.L. West last season.

But sort through those spit-shine transactions and you uncover one potential problem: the setup role, which has been the domain of righthander **Scot Shields** for the past four seasons. Shields has shown remarkable durability over that span as a bridge to closer Francisco Rodriguez. In 2004, he made 60 appearances, 44 of which lasted more than one inning. Over the past four seasons, Shields has been the most-used reliever in the game, amassing a major league-leading 361½ relief innings.

Last year, though, Old Reliable hit the roughest patch of his relief career. He endured a handful of second half nightmare outings that sent his ERA soaring from 1.66 on July 14 to 3.97 on September 2. "I am not quite sure what went wrong, really," Shields says. "I had a bad game, and maybe I started thinking too much. I just had to go out and get back to basics and just throw."

Just throwing is what has made Shields perfect for his role. If he does that again for the next six months, the Angels will have few weaknesses—and could easily top last year's 94 wins.

"I think we have everything we need here," says righthanded starter Jake Westbrook. "I think everyone in here was happy there were no big trades. Other teams might have made changes, but we didn't think we needed that."

Standing pat could prove risky because it's possible the Indians will be competing with the teams that did land marquee players. They could wind up chasing the A.L. wild card against Bedard's Mariners. They will face Swisher, a new member of the Central Division's White Sox. And, of course, Cabrera is the new cornerstone for the Indians' top rival, a Tigers bunch that will be grumpy after finishing eight games behind Cleveland in last year's standings.

No team stockpiled talent quite like Detroit this offseason. The Tigers added Cabrera, shortstop Edgar Renteria and outfielder Jacque Jones to a lineup that was second in the league in runs last year, and they pulled in pitcher Dontrelle Willis, too.

"They're going to be tough, no question,"

Shapiro says. "They have a very, very deep lineup. But they were tough last year. They've been tough the last few years. We're used to that."

Detroit is—almost universally, if not in this magazine—the pick to win the A.L. Central. The challenge for the Indians, then, is not merely to find a way to come up with one more win. It's to find a way to fend off the new behemoth in Detroit, then come up with that elusive final win. That, however, is not how the Tigers see things.

"We haven't done anything," says Detroit manager Jim Leyland. "The Cleveland Indians are the Central Division champions. I'm excited because I think we have a really good team. I don't mind expectations because that means you are a good team. At the same time, we are respectful of our opponents."

The Indians, certainly, are deserving of respect. They're not a team prone to chest-puffing, but they're a team that carries what Wedge calls "quiet confidence." Last year's battle scars have healed, and this team figures to be tougher.

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If Manny rebounds, the Red Sox will thrive

Back in November, with the Red Sox still basking in the glow of a second World Series championship in four years, general manager Theo Epstein reflected on the nature of change in sports.

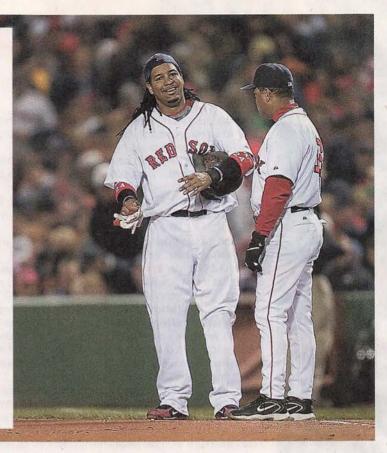
"Change is going to happen," he said. "The question is, do you make the change, or do you just sit back and let the change happen to you?"

At the time, Epstein seemed to be hinting at something big happening for his Red Sox—perhaps signing Alex Rodriguez or maybe trading for Johan Santana. Instead, Epstein remained quiet this offseason, bringing back, essentially, the same team with the possible infusion of Jacoby Ellsbury in center field. In the end, Epstein avoided change.

But that doesn't mean the 2008 Red Sox can't top what the '07 Red Sox accomplished. And you don't have to dig deep into the roster to figure out how. Just look at one of the team's biggest names, Manny Ramirez, and note that his numbers were way off last year. Ramirez hit just 20 home runs, the lowest total in his 13 full major league seasons, and slugged .493—another career low.

Ramirez will turn 36 in May, and he's at a crossroads in Boston. He is in the last year of his contract, and the Red Sox have an option to keep him for '09—at \$20 million. With prospect Brandon Moss in need of playing time, Ramirez will have to prove he's still capable of hitting 35 homers and driving in 100 runs. Otherwise, he will not be worth the cost, and a serious lineup change will be in order.

Ramirez is dealing with it. "I'm looking forward to '08," he said this spring. He paused and added, "and '09."



The Indians were woefully short on playoff experience in 2007—only Kenny Lofton had significant postseason credentials among Cleveland's regulars—and in losing the final three games of the ALCS by a combined 30-5 score after building a 3-1 series lead, it showed.

To repeat as division champs—and to go on to win the 11 games required to become World Series champs in October—the Indians will need several things to fall just right. They'll need another Cy Young-type season from lefthander C.C. Sabathia. They'll need righthander Fausto Carmona, who won 19 games in his first year as a starter, to have an impressive follow-up. They'll need continued consistency from the bullpen and maturation from Cabrera and Gutierrez.

But, mostly, the Indians will need Hafner to get his swing straightened out, to be the dangerous third-spot slugger the team had come to rely on before last year's disappointment. He needs to be productive enough to offset the Tigers' acquisition of Cabrera. He needs to be the kind of hitter who thwacks the ball so loudly, so perfectly, that on any Florida morning, you can tell it's him, even behind a layer of corrugated steel. He needs to get his team one more win.

"I think that we'll all see that," Shelton says. "I think Travis will be himself again, and our lineup is going to be that much better because of it." **SN**



Too-emotional Sabathia is ready to move on

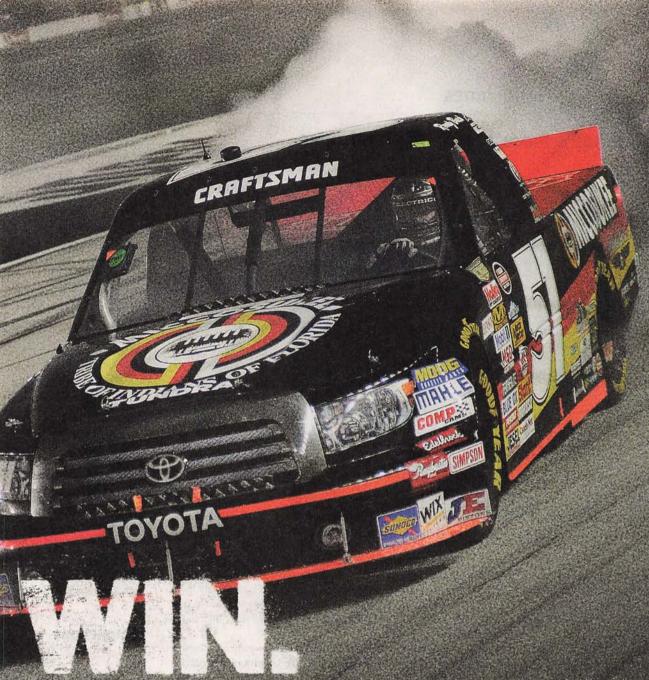
The loss stung, and not only because of the disappointment for his team, the fans and everyone else who had believed 2007 would be the year the Indians ended a championship drought that stretches back to 1948. For Indians ace lefthander C.C. Sabathia, Cleveland's seven-game ALCS defeat against Boston was particularly painful because he, personally, had let the team down.

Sabathia's pitching development had, in large part, focused on an ability to master his emotions. But in the playoffs, he fell back into bad habits. He was overthrowing. He was too fiery. He was trying to strike out every batter. After the ALCS loss, he told reporters, "I wanted to win so badly, I got real emotional, real competitive. It took me over. That hasn't happened to me in a couple of years."

Heading into this season, Sabathia insists he has put his 2007 playoff experience—he was 0-2 with a 10.45 ERA in the ALCS—behind him. But another problem looms. Sabathia can become a free agent next season, and he and the team are still far apart on an extension. It could become a distraction.

Which makes a spring sighting of Sabathia leaning against his silver Mercedes S65 AMG and chatting into his cell phone while wearing a pair of slippers somehow comforting for Indians fans. For now, it looks like memories of last year and concerns about the contract are far from his mind. If he hopes to repeat his Cy Young season (19-7, 3.21 ERA), that's a necessity.

"I am relaxed," Sabathia says. "I am excited, ready to get this season going."



Kyle Busch earned back-to-back NASCAR Craftsman Truck Series wins, taking the victory at Atlanta Motor Speedway. Busch in his #51 Billy Ballew Motorsports Miccosukee Tundra, led the final 15 laps. Good job. Keep it up, Rowdy. For the latest news, visit toyota.com/pitpass



TOYOTA moving forward



Not so fast: Baseball's marathon is all about pace



A good manager like Leyland knows he can't push his team to go too fast in the early going.

Think of the beginning of a season like the beginning of a marathon. You need a good start, but you don't want to push too hard. You especially want a good first month because it can tell you a lot about how the entire season will go.

The most stressful times for a race are right before the start and the first mile. Go too slow and you could be left behind. Go too hard and you'll burn out. Same thing with baseball teams. Managers know that guys feel fine now. After all, they have had the entire winter off.

But good managers realize two other things: 1. The everyday guys are still working themselves into the young season and need days off. 2. They need to fight the urge to try to win every game no matter what the cost. They don't let a starter throw 115 pitches on opening day just to get a win. They don't send out a reliever four times in the first five games because he's really got it going.

The first month is all about preserving your team's strength for the long haul. Just like vou can't simulate spring training at

home in the winter, you can't quite simulate game speed during spring training. A guy who was not sore during the spring might all of a sudden come to the park with a bad back or tight hamstring. If you don't rest him, the next thing you know the soreness turns into a lingering injury that drags on until June. Then you've

Guys don't care as much about swinging well or pitching well early in camp as they do in the final days. Early on, we're making

adjustments and tinkering. By the end, you want to be strong and healthy, but you also want to feel good about who you are. That gives you a much better chance of getting out of the blocks as a team. Some players might feel differently, but if you're not right coming out of camp, you can't just turn on a light on opening day and have everything be fine. Our manager, Jim Leyland, tells us that all the time.

If guys think they are just going to throw their gloves out there and get people out, they're wrong. It doesn't work that way for pitchers or hitters. Clubs that struggle the last week of camp generally have trouble getting out of the blocks.

So enjoy the popcorn, sunshine and leisurely pace of the exhibitions for another week or so. But when the last week of spring training arrives, you really should pay attention to your favorite club. That's when you really find out what you've got.

power poll

1. Red Sox

SN's

- 2. Indians
- 3. Tigers
- 4. Angels
- 5. Yankees
- 6. Diamondbacks
- 7. Phillies
- 8. Mets
- 9. Rockies
- 10. Braves
- 11. Cubs
- 12. Blue Jays
- 13. Mariners
- 14. Brewers
- 15. Dodgers
- 16. Padres
- 17. White Sox
- 18. Rays
- 19. Reds
- 20. Astros
- 21. Twins
- 22. Cardinals
- 23. Royals
- 24. Rangers
- 25. Nationals 26. Athletics
- 27. Marlins
- 28. Pirates
- 29. Giants
- 30. Orioles

Predictions

Playoffs

A.L. champion Red Sox

N.L. champion Diamondbacks **World Series** champion Red Sox

Awards

A.L. MVP

Grady Sizemore, Indians

N.L. MVP Matt Holliday,

Rockies A.L. Cy Young Felix Hernandez, Mariners

N.L. Cy Young Dan Haren, Diamondbacks

The Closer's opening day checklists

HITTERS

- 1. Get your front foot down. This allows the ball to get to you and prevents lunging.
- 2. Get your hands calloused. You don't need to miss time with blisters
- 3. Train your trunk. Make sure your back and legs are ready for the unbelievable amount of torque you'll be generating day after day.
- 4. Drive the ball the other way sometimes. That means you're not jumping and trying to do too much.
- 5. Don't worry about the big picture. Focus instead on the first few games.

PITCHERS

- 1. Locate your fastball. Down and away is a good place to start.
- 2. Get your arm strong. Be prepared for the abuse you are about to endure.
- 3. Find your breaking ball. Consistency is mandatory.
- 4. Get ready to grind; all the good ones can do it. If your No. 1 goal is to not give away an outing mentally all year, you can give yourself an edge.
- 5. Remember all the work you've already put in and have fun. Let it fly.

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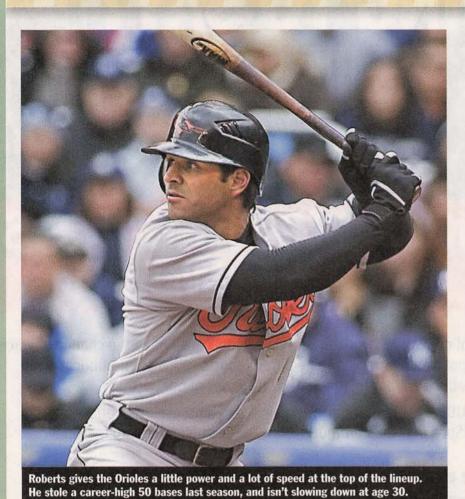
*NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. Drawing starts 12:01 AM ET 3/03/08 and ends 11:59 PM ET 6/30/08 when all entries must be received. Open only to legal residents of the 50 United States/DC and Canada (excluding Quebec), 18 years of age or older as of the date of entry except employees of Sponsor, their immediate families, and those living in the same household. Odds of winning depend on the number of entries received. ARV of 25 prizes: \$100 each. Sponsor: Sporting News, 750 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017. Sporting News reserves the right to terminate the Fan Network, and/or your participation/membership, at any time for any or no reason, without notice.

BALTIMORE ORIOLES

PREDICTED FINISH

5th

A.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE The Orioles are rebuilding, and it's about time. They'll stink this season, but at least fans will be able to see the team has some direction.

BATTING ORDER

Brian Roberts, 2B

Melvin Mora, 3B

Nick Markakis, RF

Kevin Millar, 1B

Luke Scott, LF

Ramon Hernandez, C

Aubrey Huff, DH

Adam Jones, CF

Luis Hernandez, SS

ROTATION

Jeremy Guthrie, R

Adam Loewen, L

Daniel Cabrera, R

Steve Trachsel, R

Brian Burres, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Chad Bradford, R

Jamie Walker, L

George Sherrill, L

Hit only .236 with runners in scoring position last

season.

Has allowed 5.28 walks per nine innings in his career.

Had 2.88 strikeouts per nine innings last season, the lowest ratio in the A.L.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

55

The percent of saves the Orioles converted in 2007, the worst in the American League and tied for last in the major leagues with the Reds.

DON'T OVERLOOK Nick

Markakis is the kind of developing star the Orioles must build around. A slow starter in each of his first two seasons, Markakis finished eighth in the A.L. with 112 RBIs last season. He needs to cut down on his strikeouts—he had 112 but only 61 walks in 2007.

FALLING Ramon Hernandez's numbers took a dive in his second season with the Orioles. The primary corner infielders—Melvin Mora and Kevin Millar—are 36, and their production has been on the decline for a few years.

Scout's view

Owner Peter Angelos has really changed his thinking. It looks like he's going along with a complete makeover. It's something they really need to do. They should have done it years ago, but I guess Angelos couldn't accept being in a situation where they knew going in they had no chance of winning. They won't be competitive for a

couple of years, but they could be interesting down the road because they have some talented arms. If Daniel Cabrera ever figures out how to pitch, look out. He's got great stuff.



Cabrera's 5.55 ERA last season didn't reflect his talent.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Matt Wieters, C. He was the team's top pick in 2007. Despite his height (6-5), Wieters is solid behind the plate.

1st

A.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE There's only one question surrounding this team: Who's going to be the No. 2 starter after Josh Beckett when the postseason comes around? The hope is that it's Daisuke Matsuzaka.

BATTING ORDER

Jacoby Ellsbury, CF

Dustin Pedroia, 2B

David Ortiz, DH

Manny Ramirez, LF

Mike Lowell, 3B

J.D. Drew, RF

Kevin Youkilis, 1B

Jason Varitek, C

Julio Lugo, SS

ROTATION

Josh Beckett, R

Daisuke Matsuzaka, R

Tim Wakefield, R

Jon Lester, L

Clay Buchholz, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Hideki Okajima, L

Manny Delcarmen, R

Jonathan Papelbon, R

Had a .700 slugging percentage against righthanders

last season.

Batted .353 with 16 RBIs in his final 68 regularseason at-bats in 2007.

Opponents hit only .146 against him last season.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

689

Boston's walks total in 2007. It was the third consecutive season the Red Sox led the majors in walks. The team's patience at the plate drives up pitch counts and exposes weak bullpens.

DON'T OVERLOOK Manny Delcarmen, who had a 1.02 WHIP and a 2.05 ERA in 2007, was overshadowed by Jonathan Papelbon and Hideki Okajima, but Delcarmen earned a setup role. He will get more save opportunities when Papelbon needs rest, and the 8.39 strikeouts per nine innings Delcarmen averaged in 2007 indicate he can do the job.

FALLING At 41, Tim Wakefield's durability is an issue. Despite shoulder problems, Wakefield made 31 starts and won 17 games last year, but his ERA was 5.64 after May. The fact that the team signed Bartolo Colon and is working him as a starter shows it is concerned.

Scout's view

They're the best team in the division, but it's going to come down to their pitching. They've got to get things sorted out without having Curt Schilling in the rotation, and Tim Wakefield was having real problems in the second half last year. A lot of what they do depends

on Clay Buchholz and Jon Lester coming forward and Daisuke Matsuzaka throwing better than last year. One hole is at shortstop, where Julio Lugo is not very good.



The Red Sox are counting on Lester to take over a starting job.

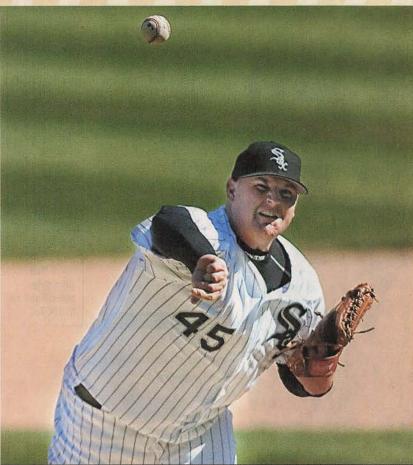
PROSPECT TO WATCH Jed Lowrie, SS/2B. Lowrie hits for a high average and gets on base, but he is blocked by Dustin Pedroia, if not Julio Lugo.



WHITE SOX

PREDICTED FINISH

3rd A.L. Central



Jenks saved 40 games and had a 2.77 ERA last season, but he also blew six saves. The White Sox are expecting better from him this season.

DEVENEY'S TAKE Last season was an utter meltdown. But why? Because they're too old—or was it just a bad-luck, teamwide slump? The answer should become clear quickly and will determine the team's fate.

BATTING ORDER

Orlando Cabrera, SS

Nick Swisher, CF

Paul Konerko, 1B

Jim Thome, DH

Jermaine Dye, RF

Joe Crede, 3B

A.J. Pierzynski, C

Jerry Owens, LF

Danny Richar, 2B

ROTATION

Mark Buehrle, L

Javier Vazquez, R

John Danks, L

Jose Contreras, R

Gavin Floyd, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Scott Linebrink, R

Octavio Dotel, R

Bobby Jenks, R

Made all 56 of his career center field starts last

center field starts last season.

Has pitched more than 200 innings in seven straight seasons.

Is 14-26 with a 5.52 ERA since the 2006 All-Star break.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

14

The White Sox's
A.L. ranking (dead last) in team batting average, on-base percentage and runs scored last season. Their batting average (.246) was last in the majors.

DON'T OVERLOOK If the White Sox return to the 90-plus victory level of 2005 and '06, Orlando Cabrera will be a crucial part of that success. He is an upgrade over Juan Uribe in every way. He will bring stability to the leadoff spot; he had a .345 OBP in 2007. He also is a two-time Gold Glove winner. **FALLING** Jermaine Dye slumped to a .254 batting average and 78 RBIs in '07, a big reason the Sox scored only 693 runs, the team's fewest since the strike-shortened 1994 season.

Scout's view



General manager Kenny Williams is acting like they're a contender, but they're way behind

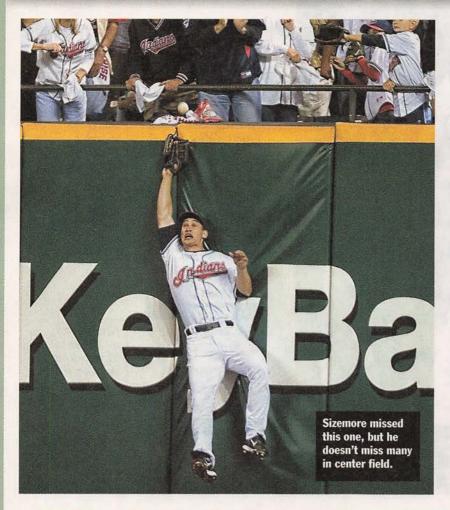
Cleveland and Detroit. He gave up too much in the trade for Nick Swisher. They're kidding themselves if they think he can play center field. They might have to go back to Brian Anderson in center because he can at least catch the ball. They've got a good bullpen with Bobby Jenks as closer and Octavio Dotel as his setup guy. This could be a really bad defensive team if they trade Joe Crede to open a spot for Josh Fields at third.

Anderson may get the call in center field.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Lance Broadway, RHP. If John Danks or Gavin Floyd founders, Broadway will be an immediate fix for the rotation.

1st

A.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE The Indians didn't make many changes, but change wasn't needed for a young team that led the league in wins last year. Repeat performances from C.C. Sabathia and Fausto Carmona are needed.

BATTING ORDER

Grady Sizemore, CF

Asdrubal Cabrera, 2B

Travis Hafner, DH

Victor Martinez, C

Ryan Garko, 1B

David Dellucci, LF

Jhonny Peralta, SS

Casey Blake, 3B

Franklin Gutierrez, RF

ROTATION

C.C. Sabathia, L

Fausto Carmona, R

Jake Westbrook, R

Paul Byrd, R

Cliff Lee, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Rafael Betancourt, R

Rafael Perez, L

Joe Borowski, R

The team went 28-12 in his starts last season.

Pitched a career-high 256½ innnings, including the playoffs, in 2007.

Allowed the highest opponents' batting average (.289) among 36 pitchers with 10 or more saves last season.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

2.26

Fausto Carmona's ERA after the break last year (3.85 before). With the confidence he picked up down the stretch, he will dominate hitters this season.

DON'T OVERLOOK The

power of motivation for C.C. Sabathia. The big lefty gets better every year and, in a contract year, he could be absolutely brutal on opposing hitters.

FALLING Travis Hafner's batting average dropped 42 points and his slugging percentage fell a whopping 208 points last year. The Indians will have to light up the scoreboard, and they won't be able to do that with their DH hitting .224 with runners in scoring position, as Hafner did last season.

Scout's view

Everybody is screaming about Detroit in this division, but I really like this team. Grady Sizemore is a great player in center field. They need Travis Hafner to have a more typical year for him at DH. I'd move Victor Martinez to first now and let Kelly Shoppach catch every day. I like Martinez, but I know their pitchers really like throwing to Shoppach. I do not like the way Joe Borowski looks as a closer, but I do like the results. I keep waiting for the wheels to come off. They've got a lot of good guys in front of him in the bullpen.

The Indians might want to consider making Shoppach their starting catcher.



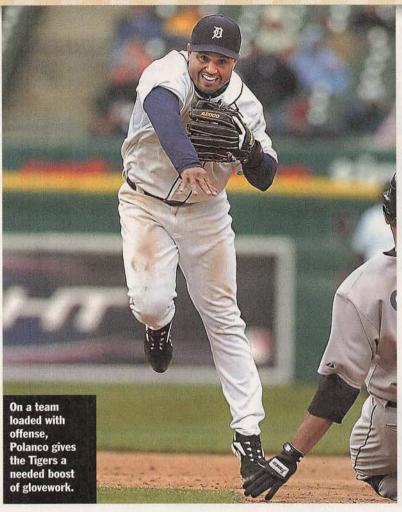
PROSPECT TO WATCH Jeff Stevens, RHP. He has the stuff and attitude to be a late-inning reliever.

DETROIT TIGERS

PREDICTED FINISH

2nd

A.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE The lineup is stacked, and the rotation is five deep. But the bullpen is packed with question marks and could prove to be the team's downfall.

BATTING ORDER

Curtis Granderson, CF

Placido Polanco, 2B

Gary Sheffield, DH

Magglio Ordonez, RF

Miguel Cabrera, 3B

Carlos Guillen, 1B

Edgar Renteria, SS

Ivan Rodriguez, C

Jacque Jones, LF

ROTATION

Justin Verlander, R

Jeremy Bonderman, R

Nate Robertson, L Kenny Rogers, L

Dontrelle Willis, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Fernando Rodney, R

Bobby Seay, L

Todd Jones, R

Didn't make an error in 141 games

last season.

Hit .374 with runners in scoring position over the past three seasons.

Went 2-8 with a 7.38 ERA in 12 second half starts last year.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

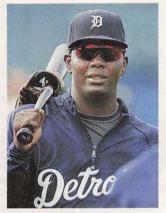
100

Leadoff hitter Curtis Granderson has set just one statistical goal—100 runs. With the lineup he has behind him, he could reach that total by August. DON'T OVERLOOK Gary Sheffield is the seen-it-all veteran, and Miguel Cabrera is the new star, but the leader of this team is Carlos Guillen. A switch hitter, Guillen is the guy the team wants at the plate in clutch situations. His struggles on defense should diminish—if not disappear—with a switch to first.

FALLING The bullpen could be a big problem. Francisco Cruceta hadn't reported to spring training entering the week because of visa issues, Fernando Rodney has struggled, Joel Zumaya (shoulder) is out until at least midseason, and Jordan Tata broke a knuckle when he punched a door after a bad outing.

Scout's view

They got Miguel Cabrera to play third, and I'm fine with that. They got Dontrelle Willis for the rotation, and I'm fine with that. But the guy who is going to make the biggest difference on this team is Edgar Renteria. He is without a doubt the most underrated player in baseball. Their bullpen is a little iffy with Joel Zumaya out and Fernando Rodney shaky in the main setup role. They're going to need every one of those runs they'll score.



Renteria doesn't get the credit he deserves.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Rick Porcello, RHP. As manager Jim Leyland told reporters: "You know you've got a real nice present, but you can't open it yet."

A.L. Central

Bannister doesn't strike out a lot of batters, but he gets results.

DEVENEY'S TAKE They've been making small strides forward, especially with the pitching staff, but until their young studs-namely Alex Gordonstart producing, this team won't score enough to win consistently.

BATTING ORDER

David DeJesus, CF

Mark Grudzielanek, 2B

Mark Teahen, LF

Jose Guillen, RF

Ross Gload, 1B

Billy Butler, DH

Alex Gordon, 3B

John Buck, C

Tony Pena, SS

ROTATION

Gil Meche, R

Brian Bannister, R

Zack Greinke, R

Brett Tomko, R

John Bale, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Ron Mahay, L

Yasuhiko Yabuta, R

Joakim Soria, R

His slugging percentage dropped by 107 points-to .410-last season.

Had 99 RBIs with Seattle in 2007. No Royal had more than 62.

Received the second-lowest run support in the A.L. in '07: 3.92 runs per start.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

The Royals' major league-low home run total last season. That must improve for them to compete in the hard-hitting A.L. Central.

DON'T OVERLOOK RHP Zack Greinke, who has No. 1 starter stuff and, finally, the mindset to go with it. Greinke appears to have come to terms with the anxiety and depression issues that slowed his rise, and he pitched well late last season as a starter after an impressive stint in the bullpen. Greinke, the No. 3 starter entering the season, has huge upside, and he's still only 24.

FALLING CF David DeJesus is too streaky for a leadoff man and needs to get on base more often. He had 19 more strikeouts than walks last season. DeJesus is prone to slumps, which could cost him a job because speedy Joey Gathright continues to improve.

Scout's view

I keep hearing how they've improved, but I don't buy it. Still, their general manager, Dayton Moore, is doing a good job trying to re-establish a connection with the past. Alex Gordon struggled last season at third base, but he's going to be good. Tony Pena will be a Gold Glove shortstop at some point. I just cannot believe Jose

Guillen was a good guy to bring into this situation. I really like Brian Bannister in the rotation, but they have to keep him healthy. Zack Greinke also is really special in the rotation.



The Royals remain high on Gordon, who hit .247 last year.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Luke Hochevar, RHP. A rookie, Hochevar could earn a spot in the rotation this season.



1st

A.L. West



DEVENEY'S TAKE After adding Torii Hunter and Jon Garland, the primary problems here are too many outfielders and starting pitchers. Wait, these are problems?

BATTING ORDER

Chone Figgins, 3B

Gary Matthews, LF

Vladimir Guerrero, RF

Garret Anderson, DH

Torii Hunter, CF

Casey Kotchman, 1B

Howie Kendrick, 2B

Mike Napoli, C

Erick Aybar, SS

ROTATION

Jon Garland, R

Jered Weaver, R

Ervin Santana, R

Joe Saunders, L Dustin Moseley, R

The state of the s

SETUP / CLOSER

Scot Shields, R

Justin Speier, R

Francisco Rodriguez, R

Has hit .333 against lefthanders and .322 against righthanders

in his career.

Has a career road record of 10-21 with a 7.14 ERA.

Leads the major leagues in holds (95) over the past three seasons.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

54

Home games the Angels won in 2007, the most in baseball. Their OPS is 100 points better at home, a major factor in that success.

DON'T OVERLOOK Howie Kendrick's performance will go a long way toward determining the Angels' success. He hit .322 last year, but hand injuries limited him to 88 games. He is a gap hitter, not a home run hitter. For the defense to be solid, Kendrick will have to adjust to new shortstop Erick Aybar quickly. **FALLING** Beware of Francisco Rodriguez. His numbers are trending the wrong direction, albeit slowly, and he is upset the Angels have not offered him a long-term contract he deems acceptable.

fewest he ever has hit during a season in which he had at least 400 at-bats.

Scout's view

I'm really interested to see how Mike Scioscia handles the outfield-DH situation. Everybody says he has four quality guys there, but it's really five with Juan Rivera. He should be the DH. Torii Hunter will play a great center field and hit for power, but he's going to add a lot of strikeouts to the middle of that lineup. They'll miss Orlando Cabrera at shortstop, but Erick Aybar can be very good if they stay with him. The problem is so many of their prospects haven't panned out.

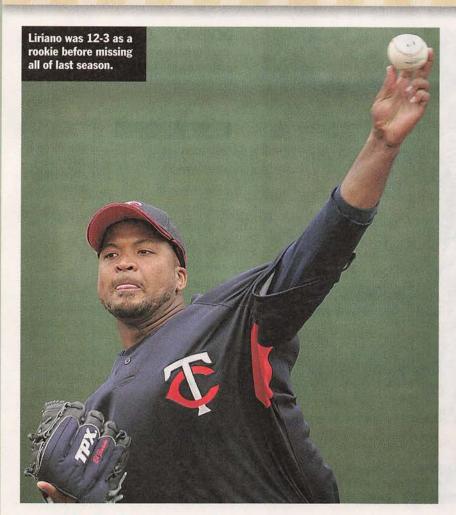
Rivera, the Angels' No. 5 outfielder, would start for many teams.



PROSPECT TO WATCH Brandon Wood, IF. Still. This seems to be the year Wood will either be in or out.

4th

A.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE Mainstays Torii Hunter and Johan Santana are gone, as is architect Terry Ryan. New general manager Bill Smith has big shoes to fill and little time to prove himself.

BATTING ORDER

Carlos Gomez, CF

Joe Mauer, C

Michael Cuddyer, RF

Justin Morneau, 1B

Delmon Young, LF

Jason Kubel, DH

Mike Lamb, 3B

Brendan Harris, 2B

Adam Everett, SS

ROTATION

Livan Hernandez, R

Scott Baker, R

Boof Bonser, R

Kevin Slowey, R

Francisco Liriano, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Pat Neshek, R

Matt Guerrier, R

Joe Nathan, R

Had 500 at-bats only once in in his first three full seasons in

the majors.

Has improved on defense since his 33-error nightmare with Texas in 2000.

Is a fly-ball pitcher in a park that demands grounders.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS



Years closer Joe Nathan has left on his contract. The Twins insist a deal will be struck soon, but Nathan sounds skeptical. If he doesn't re-sign, he will be a very desirable trade commodity come July.

DON'T OVERLOOK Michael Cuddyer has transformed himself from a utility player into an above-average outfielder who hits in the heart of the order. He will bat third, ahead of Justin Morneau, and that is where he has been most productive. His average of 77 RBIs the past three years should improve markedly.

FALLING Whether Carlos Gomez, Craig Monroe or even Delmon Young replaces Torii Hunter, the decline in the quality of the defense in center field will be obvious.

Scout's view

Everybody thinks they're going to be down, but I don't buy that. I look at them and see a pretty good team. The difference is their strength is no longer starting pitching. They really need lefthander Francisco Liriano to bounce back. Livan Hernandez will eat up a lot of innings, but he can be a pain in the butt to deal

with. I love Joe Mauer, but I wonder if he's injuryprone or if he's playing the wrong position. The middle of the lineup is good, and the bullpen is real good from top to bottom.



Mauer's history of injuries may force the Twins to move him to a new spot.

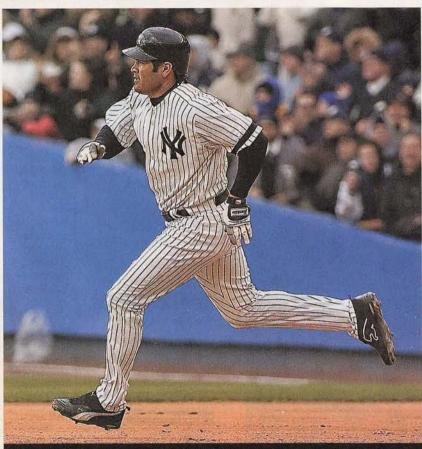
PROSPECT TO WATCH Jason Pridie, CF. Pridie came to the Twins in the Matt Garza trade and is poised to be an excellent major league player.

NEW YORK YANKEES

PREDICTED FINISH

2nd

A.L. East



Damon is 34, but he hasn't slowed down much on the basepaths. His 27 stolen bases last season were his most since he stole 30 with the Red Sox in 2003.

DEVENEY'S TAKE Excitement over the team's three young starters is high. But young pitchers need to take their lumps, and don't let these three guys obscure the fact that this team is aging.

BATTING ORDER

Johnny Damon, LF

Derek Jeter, SS

Bobby Abreu, RF

Alex Rodriguez, 3B

Jorge Posada, C

Hideki Matsui, DH

Jason Giambi, 1B

Robinson Cano, 2B

Melky Cabrera, CF

ROTATION

Andy Pettitte, L

Chien-Ming Wang, R

Mike Mussina, R

Phil Hughes, R

Ian Kennedy, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Joba Chamberlain, R

LaTroy Hawkins, R

Mariano Rivera, R

The team was 75-48 in games he started last season.

His 5.15 ERA last year was 0.34 higher than his previous career worst.

If Hawkins can't get through the eighth, Rivera will be wasted.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

34

Total saves the Yankees recorded last season, 12th in the A.L. Mariano Rivera's total (30) declined for the third consecutive year, but the bigger problem was a failure in the seventh and eighth innings. A gap in that bridge still exists.

DON'T OVERLOOK The Yankees' comeback last season coincided with Robinson Cano's emergence from a slow start. In the second half, he had 57 of his 97 RBIs and cut his strikeouts from 52 to 33. His defense must continue to improve.

FALLING Mike Mussina's startling collapse last season makes the team wary of what it can expect from him. He finished with a 5.15 ERA and was at 5.72 in the second half. His 3-0 record in September may be a sign of hope, but teams still hit .300 against him.

Scout's view

Success depends a lot on how deep those young guys—Phil Hughes, Ian Kennedy and Joba Chamberlain, if he starts—can get into games. They have to take some of the pressure off the bullpen. They may not have as much power as they've had in the past, but with Joe Girardi as the manager, you'll see a more diversified attack. They're a lot better if they can keep Johnny Damon in the lineup. He makes a big difference.

Hughes was 5-3 in 13 starts during his rookie season.



PROSPECT TO WATCH Austin Jackson, OF. Jackson is the best athlete in the system. He is a strong candidate to replace Johnny Damon.

ATHLETICS

PREDICTED FINISH

A.L. West



Sorry, Huston, closing for a last-place team doesn't allow for many moments of spontaneous celebration. Good news, though: The job pays pretty well.

DEVENEY'S TAKE In pursuit of a rebuild, they've dealt away Nick Swisher, Mark Kotsay and Dan Haren. Expect the rest of the familiar names on the roster to follow in the coming months.

BATTING ORDER

Travis Buck, RF

Mark Ellis, 2B

Daric Barton, 1B

Jack Cust, DH

Emil Brown, LF

Eric Chavez, 3B

Chris Denorfia, CF

Bobby Crosby, SS

Kurt Suzuki, C

ROTATION

Rich Harden, R

Joe Blanton, R

Lenny DiNardo, L

Chad Gaudin, R

Justin Duchscherer, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Joey Devine, R

Alan Embree, L

Huston Street, R

Average has dropped in four consecutive seasons.

Has hit .229 and .226 the past two seasons.

Blew five saves in 21 chances last year, the worst conversion rate among front-line A.L. closers.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

141

Combined games missed by the left side of the infield, Eric Chavez and Bobby Crosby, in 2007. Injuries already have slowed both in spring training.

DON'T OVERLOOK The lack of righthanded power is glaring. Middle-of-the-order hitters Daric Barton, Jack Cust and Eric Chavez all bat lefthanded, and the best power source from the right side is Mark Ellis, who hit a career-high 19 homers last year. FALLING Chavez, 30, underwent surgeries on both shoulders and his back in the offseason, yet announced before spring training that he would be ready for opening day. He had to have an epidural to relieve stiffness in his back before the exhibition season was a week old, and his status is uncertain.

Scout's view

I think Billy Beane was getting bored and decided to tear up his roster one more time as a challenge. He got a lot of good, young talent for Dan Haren, Nick Swisher and Mark Kotsay, and Oakland will be drafting high for the next few years. The A's need Rich Harden to bounce back and stay healthy so they can get something for him. They might be good again in about 2010 or so. The next few years are going to be rough. It's a good thing manager Bob Geren is tight with Beane.

If Harden stays healthy, he'll be the next big name to leave town.



PROSPECT TO WATCH Gio Gonzalez, LHP. Acquired in the Nick Swisher deal, Gonzalez throws a sneaky-quick fastball and plus curveball for strikes.

SEATTLE MARINERS

PREDICTED FINISH

2nd A.L. West

DEVENEY'S TAKE Erik Bedard will bolster a deep and talented pitching staff, but it's difficult to see where the offense is going to come from. A turnaround year from Richie

BATTING ORDER

Sexson would be a nice start.

Ichiro Suzuki, CF

Jose Vidro, DH

Raul Ibanez, LF

Adrian Beltre, 3B

Brad Wilkerson, RF

Richie Sexson, 1B

Kenji Johjima, C

Jose Lopez, 2B Yuniesky Betancourt, SS

ROTATION

Erik Bedard, L

Felix Hernandez, R

Carlos Silva, R

Jarrod Washburn, L

Miguel Batista, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Brandon Morrow, R

Sean Green, R

J.J. Putz, R

Hasn't had 30 doubles in a season since his 2001 rookie year.

Has hit only .250 with a .591 OPS after the All-Star break the past two seasons combined.

Had the lowest opponents' batting average (.212) and most strikeouts per nine innings (10.93) among A.L. starters in 2007.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

35

Total walks drawn last year by middle infielders Yuniesky Betancourt and Jose Lopez. They were a big reason the Mariners were last in the league in walks and had a middle-of-the-pack offense.

DON'T OVERLOOK J.J. Putz emerged last year. He has three above-average pitches and a lively fastball. Coming out of college, he had a reputation for being soft, but no more. His WHIP (0.70) was the best among all closers, and he blew only two saves. FALLING Last season, Richie Sexson hit .205, had a .694 OPS and batted .187 with runners in scoring position. The Mariners don't have a good alternative, so Sexson must return to form if they want to challenge the Angels.

Putz's ERA has dropped in each of his four seasons in the majors, hitting

a career-low 1.38 last year. Oh yeah, and he saved 40 games.

Scout's view

With Baltimore last season, Erik Bedard was as good as any pitcher in the league. He'll help, obviously. To me, free agent Carlos Silva is a risk. He wants to get guys to hit grounders, and the right side of that infield, with Jose Lopez and Richie Sexson, is pretty bad. A lot of those balls are going to roll

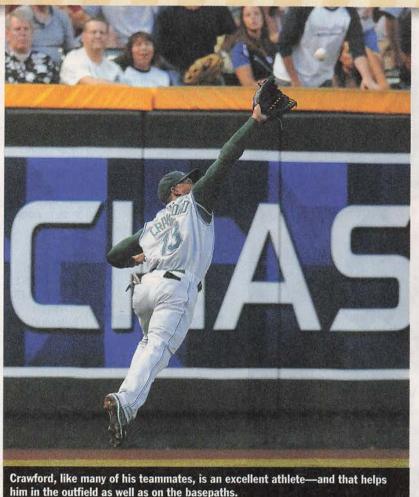
through. Raul Ibanez is an underrated hitter. They need to be more creative on offense. They ran the bases terribly last year. I don't think catcher Kenji Johjima has clicked with the staff yet.



Bedard will fit right in at the top of the Mariners' rotation.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Jeff Clement, C. He was the best-hitting catcher in the minors last year. Defense is a shortcoming, though.

A.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE There's cause for excitement, but let's not go overboard. The goal is to get to .500, which would be an accomplishment. The playoffs? Out of the question.

BATTING ORDER

Akinori Iwamura, 2B

Carl Crawford, LF

Carlos Pena, 1B

B.J. Upton, CF

Cliff Floyd, DH

Jonny Gomes, RF

Willy Aybar, 3B

Dioner Navarro, C

Jason Bartlett, SS

ROTATION

Scott Kazmir, L

James Shields, R

Matt Garza, R

Edwin Jackson, R

Andy Sonnanstine, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Dan Wheeler, R

Al Reyes, R

Troy Percival, R

Has the most triples in the major leagues (68) over the past five seasons.

Made a huge leap in slugging percentage last year—to .508—from his 2006 figure of .291.

Allowed a league-high 4.87 walks per nine innings last year.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

6

Rays who struck out at least 112 times in 2007. By comparison, the Angels had only one player with 100 strikeouts. The Rays also had only one player, Carlos Pena, with more than 100 walks.

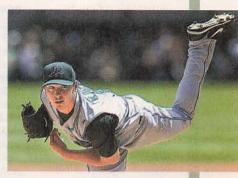
DON'T OVERLOOK The

acquisition of Matt Garza from the Twins adds depth to the rotation. One scout says Garza, 24, has as much talent as any of the Rays' top starters. One problem: Lefthanded hitters batted .314 against him in 2007. **FALLING** Carlos Pena reported to camp with the confidence that comes after having a career year (46 homers and 121 RBIs). Why a potential major drop-off? Before 2007, he had topped 20 homers only once and had a career high of 82 RBIs.

Scout's view

This may be the most athletic team in the league. If this were a track meet, they would win the gold medal. They are getting better, but improvement in this division means they can finish fourth. The elbow problem that Scott Kazmir had this spring scared the Rays because he's so important to this team. With Kazmir and James

Shields, they've got two pretty good starters. Having veterans like Troy Percival and Cliff Floyd around will help. Too many of their young guys act like they're 10-year veterans.



The Rays will keep a close eye on Kazmir's elbow.

PROSPECT TO WATCH David Price, LHP. Picked No. 1 in the '07 draft, Price is on a fast track after flashing a 99-mph fastball in his spring debut.

ROM TOP: JIM COWSERT / ICON SMI; RONALD MARTINEZ / GETTY IMAGES

TEXAS RANGERS

PREDICTED FINISH

3rd A.L. West

DEVENEY'S TAKE The starting pitchers had a 5.50 ERA last year. So they brought back everyone and added Jason Jennings, whose ERA was 6.45. This is progress?



Young began his career as a second baseman but has turned himself into a solid defensive shortstop since moving there full-time in 2004.

BATTING ORDER

Ian Kinsler, 2B

Josh Hamilton, CF Michael Young, SS

Milton Bradley, DH

Hank Blalock, 3B

Marlon Byrd, RF

Ben Broussard, 1B

Frank Catalanotto, LF

Gerald Laird, C

ROTATION

Kevin Milwood, R

Vicente Padilla, R

Jason Jennings, R

Brandon McCarthy, R

Kason Gabbard, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Eddie Guardado, L

Joaquin Benoit, R

C.J. Wilson, L

Hit a major league-best .385 with runners in scoring position

runners in scoring position over the past three seasons.

Has a career record of 15-11 with a 5.04 ERA at Rangers Ballpark in Arlington.

Has hit 75 batters—most in the major leagues—since 2002.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

10

Hank Blalock reached double digits in homers last season despite missing 104 games because of surgery in May to remove a rib. He was able to come back as a DH in September.

bon't overlook Gerald Laird hit .224 in '07, striking out 103 times in 120 games, but he's solid on defense and handles pitchers better than Jarrod Saltalamacchia, 22. If Saltalamacchia steps up, Laird could become trade bait.

FALLING The pitching looks even shakier than it did last year. Injuries have kept three key members of the staff—setup man Joaquin Benoit, closer C.J. Wilson and starter Brandon McCarthy—sidelined for long stretches of the spring. Not a good sign.

Scout's view



Jarrod Saltalamacchia was the key for them in the Mark Teixeira deal, and he is

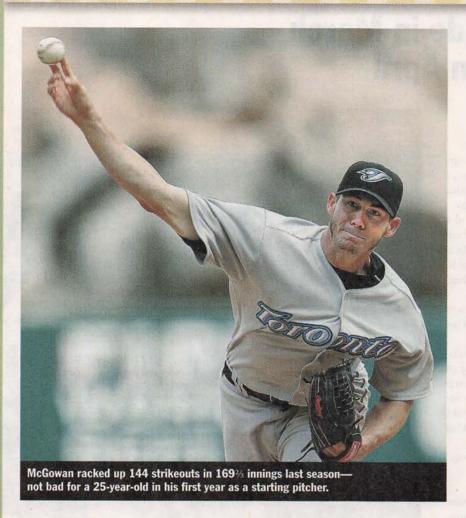
really rough behind the plate. He boxes balls and doesn't do anything to help his pitchers. He needs a lot of work. They're taking a risk on putting Josh Hamilton in center field. I believe he's cleaned up, but what he did during his wild days has to take a toll on his body. Maybe that's why he kept getting injured last year.

Saltalamacchia isn't getting it done behind the plate.

PROSPECTS TO WATCH The organization's top players—guys not quite ready for the majors like SS Elvis Andrus, OF Chris Davis and 2B German Duran—are playing this spring in front of the organization's top prospect: first-year president Nolan Ryan, whose job is to restore respect for a long-downtrodden organization.

3rd

A.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE This team has one of the best pitching staffs no one talks about. It was second in the A.L. in ERA last year and figures to be better. A decent season from the lineup could mean a playoff spot.

BATTING ORDER

David Eckstein, SS

Alex Rios, RF

Vernon Wells, CF

Frank Thomas, DH

Scott Rolen, 3B

Lyle Overbay, 1B

Matt Stairs, LF

Aaron Hill 2B

Gregg Zaun, C

ROTATION

Roy Halladay, R

A.J. Burnett, R

Dustin McGowan, R

Shaun Marcum, R

Jesse Litsch, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Jeremy Accardo, R

Brian Tallet, L

B.J. Ryan, L

Had a career-high 20 errors last season, 14 more than he had in 2006.

Slugging percentage dropped 117 points to .391, lowest among A.L. first basemen.

Had the secondlowest opponents slugging percentage (.347) among A.L. starters.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

.500

The Blue Jays' record against the A.L. East in 2007: 10-8 against the Orioles, 8-10 against the Yankees and 9-9 against the Red Sox and Rays.

DON'T OVERLOOK A healthy B.J. Ryan would give the Blue Jays one of the deepest bullpens in the A.L. Ryan missed most of the 2007 season after elbow surgery, but his mid-90s fastball has returned and his command and stamina are coming back.

FALLING Scott Rolen and David Eckstein, who were acquired in the offseason, are not ideal players for artificial turf. Both have struggled with injuries, and Eckstein lacks quickness and range. Plus, Rolen has struggled against power pitchers, which will hurt him worse in the American League.

Scout's view

If they can keep A.J. Burnett and B.J. Ryan healthy, they've got the best pitching in the division. Roy Halladay is lights-out, and Dustin McGowan has tremendous stuff. I really wonder about the left side of the infield. I thought David Eckstein was done as a shortstop two years ago. He'll hit, but the pitchers won't be happy with his defense. Scott Rolen is a big question mark for me. He might be the best defensive third baseman ever, but hasn't hit much since hurting his shoulder.



Ryan saved 74 games in two seasons before an elbow injury limited him to three last year.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Travis Snider, OF. At 245 pounds, he swings one of the best power bats in the minors. He's at least a year away from the bigs.

Fantasy Source

FS Fantasy Source Baseball, your online fantasy authority: fantasy.sportingnews.com/baseball.

Arms deals made in March often go sour in April

By Chris Bahr

The golden rules I followed for my drafts this year? I didn't select any of the Athletics' so-called hitters, I didn't reach for closers, and I sure as heck didn't waste late-round picks on starting pitching depth.

Why my embargo on extra arms? We live in a world in which we're much too concerned about things such as a Fourth Meal and two-start pitchers. In our quest for excess, we unwisely load up on mediocre (at best) food at 3 a.m. and mediocre (at best) arms to maximize two-start opportunities.

Ask yourself this: Do you really want two starts from Miguel Batista? Didn't think so. Luckily, it's not too late to realize this and correct your mistake.

From year to year, hitters are much more consistent than pitchers, so you're better off focusing on offense when it comes to your bench. Plus, if you're faced with an innings limit in your league, why waste valuable innings on subpar starting pitching? Instead, use the early portion of the season to scout red-hot arms on your waiver wire.

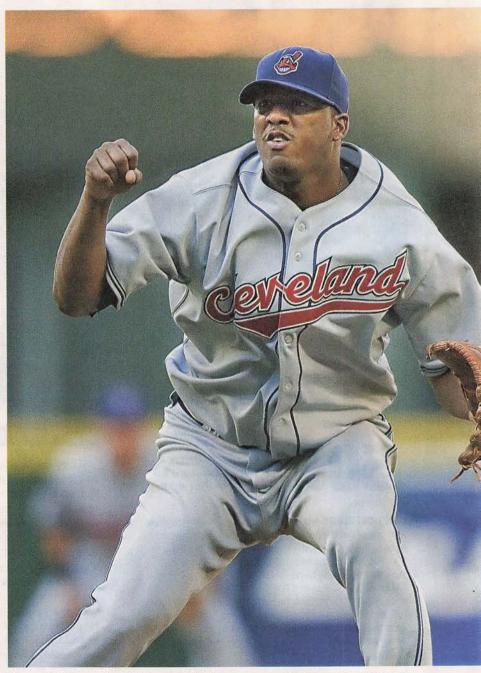
"But there are no quality arms on the waiver wire," you whine.

Wrong.

Last April, plenty of waiver-wire gems were unearthed. Guys such as Fausto Carmona and James Shields went undrafted in most leagues that didn't include one of their family members, but both became top-notch arms right through their final pitch of the regular season. And they weren't alone. Several other pitchers went from waiver-wire fodder to key fantasy producers-even if only for a brief period-and the same will be true this season.

Unfortunately, you don't know who those pitchers will be. So why guess and clog your bench with guys you probably will drop by May anyway? Those roster spots would be better spent addressing your offense in the early going, when there are plenty of off-days (read: holes in your daily lineup).

Once you're a few weeks into the season and you've seen some guys pitch their way out of obscurity, then it'll be time to wipe the nacho cheese off your chin and hit the waiver wire for starting pitchers.



Who could have predicted Carmona would become a surprise fantasy star last year?

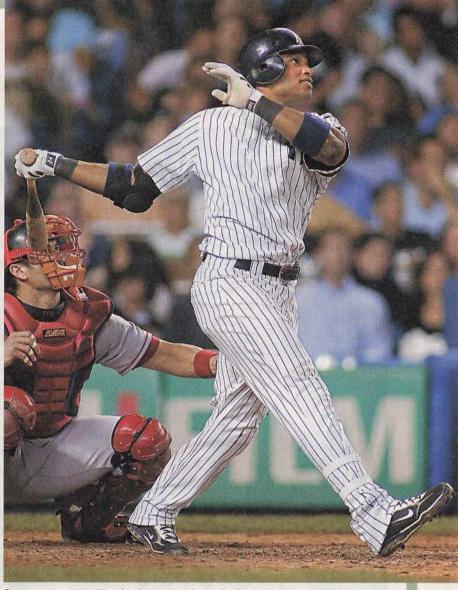
Don't be the fool ...

The choices fantasy owners make early in the season can set up a great year or be the first stumbling blocks in a poor one. Fantasy Source editors Chris Bahr, Bill Bender and Matt Lutovsky weigh in on what not to do once April arrives.

Bahr: Don't fall for the 3-for-1 deal. Every league has at least a couple of owners who try to package several overachieving players for one established talent who might be slumping in April. In most cases, the three players you'd get in such a scenario have peaked. And after the performance of those players subsides, you still stubbornly hold on to all three too long because you don't want to admit your mistake. Quantity doesn't always equal quality.

Bender: Never release a guy in a Red Sox or Yankees uniform early on, unless his name is Julio Lugo. An owner in my league cut Robinson Cano in May last season. Cano fizzled before the break (.274, six homers, 40 RBIs), but flourished after (.343-13-57). I picked up Cano and remained patient, and all I had to do was cut Lugo. Remember this if you're tempted to ax Dustin Pedroia should he start slowly.

Lutovsky: Don't wait too long to pick up a player you want. In one of my leagues two years ago, an owner delayed adding Twins pitcher Francisco Liriano because Liriano needed one more relief appearance to become RP-eligible. Liriano was picked up by another owner a day later, and the first owner watched in disgust as Liriano dominated baseball for the next couple of months.



Cano was worth waiting for last season—too bad many owners cut him.

Counterpoints: Is this the year for oft-injured Brewers second baseman Rickie Weeks?

After all the time Weeks has missed the past two seasons because of wrist injuries, I'm convinced he will stay healthy in 2008. Weeks was just that in the final seven weeks of '07, when he hit .273 with 11 home runs, 16 RBIs and 15 stolen bases. After an uneventful offseason, there's no reason why his strong finish won't carry over. His blend of power and speed from the leadoff spot will allow him to produce like a top five fantasy second baseman. —Roger Kuznia



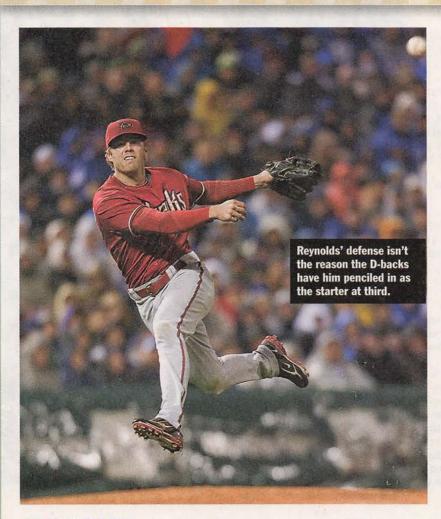
Weeks has the talent, no question, but he hasn't been able to stay healthy or consistently hit for a high average. Yes, the 25-homer, 25-steal potential is there, but so is the potential for a .250 average and fewer than 60 RBIs—and that's even if he plays a full season. He had only 36 RBIs in 118 games last year, hitting primarily in the leadoff spot. Obviously, Weeks is worth a pick in the middle rounds, but don't draft him high and expect too much from him. —Matt Lutovsky

LEFT: JAY DROWNS / SN; DAVID DUROCHIK FOR SN; JOHN DUNN FOR SN



AMONDBACKS

N.L. West



DEVENEY'S TAKE Lost in the excitement over the Diamondbacks' imposing rotation is the fact the bullpen has a new closer and setup men and the offense had the worst batting average in the N.L. last

BATTING ORDER

Chris Young, CF

Orlando Hudson, 2B

Conor Jackson, 1B

Eric Byrnes, LF

Mark Reynolds, 3B

Stephen Drew, SS

Justin Upton, RF

Chris Snyder, C

ROTATION

Brandon Webb, R

Randy Johnson, L

Dan Haren, R

Doug Davis, L

Micah Owings, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Tony Pena, R

Chad Qualls, R

Brandon Lyon, R

Had the fourthlowest on-base percentage (.295) among N.L. qualifiers last season.

Made his major league debut last year after hitting .319 in the minors.

Had 30 holds in 33 opportunities last season.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

Wins the Diamondbacks had in 1-run games last season, against 20 losses. That's the most wins and the best winning percentage in the majors in such situations.

DON'T OVERLOOK Orlando Hudson, a three-time Gold Glove winner, has improved his offense so that it is on the same level as his defense. Hudson reached career highs for batting average (.294) and on-base percentage (.376) in 2007 while serving as an effective No. 2 hitter.

FALLING Hall of Fame pitcher Nolan Ryan won 12 games at age 44. Randy Johnson, who turned 44 last September, would do well to match that, but back problems limited him to 10 starts and 563/3 innings last season.

Scout's view

They sure are cocky, but they made the best move of the offseason in their division when they traded for Danny Haren. He's better than Brandon Webb, and that gives them two quality guys at the front of the rotation. I like their position players, but some things

could go wrong. They've got to get Chris Young out of the leadoff spot. He has speed and power, but that doesn't do you any good if you strike out 150 times.

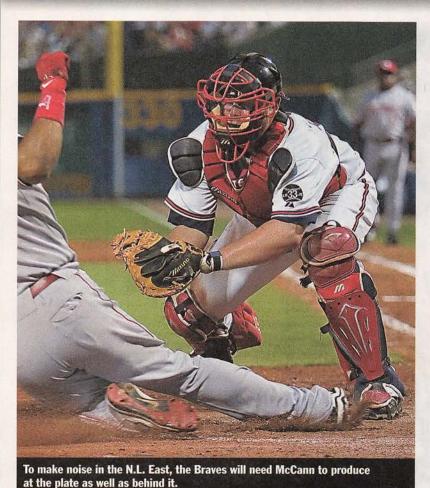


Young can only use his speed when he actually gets on base.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Max Scherzer, RHP. He held opponents at Class A and AA to a .210 batting average last season.

3rd

N.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE If Mark Teixeira picks up where he left off last year and if Chipper Jones keeps sipping from the fountain of youth, the Braves should be surprise contenders in the East.

BATTING ORDER

Kelly Johnson, 2B

Mark Kotsay, CF

Chipper Jones, 3B

Mark Teixeira, 1B

Jeff Francoeur, RF

Matt Diaz, LF

Brian McCann, C

Yunel Escobar, SS

ROTATION

John Smoltz, R

Tim Hudson, R

Tom Glavine, L

Mike Hampton, L

Jo-Jo Reyes, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Peter Moylan, R

Mike Gonzalez, L

Rafael Soriano, R

Had 100-plus RBIs in both of his full big league seasons.

Was 8-1 with a 3.39 ERA in a 16-start stretch last season before finishing with three rough starts.

Had two saves and a 1.59 ERA in 17 innings before an elbow injury ended his '07 season.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

92

Brian McCann's RBI total last season, the best of any catcher in the N.L. The Braves will need that kind of production again to offset losing Edgar Renteria and Andruw Jones.

DON'T OVERLOOK Yunel Escobar has the unenviable task of replacing Edgar Renteria, but the drop-off won't be crippling. In 94 games last season, Escobar hit .326 and had a .385 on-base percentage, important for a leadoff hitter. He also has more range than Renteria and runs better. **FALLING** The patchwork closer combo of Rafael Soriano and Mike Gonzalez, who is recovering from elbow surgery, is a cause for concern.

Scout's view

A lot of people think they're going to be pretty good, and I think they might be right. Mark Teixeira is going to have a huge year at first base. They need Chipper Jones to stay healthy. They'll miss Andruw Jones in center. Their pitching should be OK. John Smoltz

is still an ace, and Tom Glavine will help. They're kind of weak at the back of the rotation. They need somebody like Jo-Jo Reyes to step up and do something there.



The Braves' hopes are riding on Teixeira's bat.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Jordan Schafer, CF. He is no more than a year away from being the long-term solution in center.

1et

N.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE Tinker to Evers to Chance, meet Ramirez to DeRosa to Lee. It's been 100 years already. Time for the Cubs to win a stinkin' World Series.

BATTING ORDER

Alfonso Soriano, LF

Ryan Theriot, SS

Kosuke Fukudome, RF

Derrek Lee, 1B

Aramis Ramirez, 3B

Mark DeRosa, 2B

Geovany Soto, C

Felix Pie, CF

ROTATION

Carlos Zambrano, R

Ted Lilly, L

Rich Hill, L

Ryan Dempster, R

Jon Lieber, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Carlos Marmol, R

Bob Howry, R

Kerry Wood, R

Had a .636 slugging percentage on the road last year, compared with .486 at Wrigley.

The staff had a 3.61 ERA in 122 regular-season innings last season with Soto behind the plate.

Averaged 12.46 strikeouts per nine innings in 2007.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

246

Opponents' batting average against the Cubs' bullpen, the lowest in the National League last season.

DON'T OVERLOOK In his first full major league season, Rich Hill ranked among the league's top 10 in opponents' batting average (.235) and strikeouts per nine innings (8.45). He won only 11 games, but that was primarily because of poor run support. **FALLING** The power production of Derrek Lee fell significantly after the wrist injury he suffered in 2006. The Cubs believe Lee never fully regained strength in the wrist last year and hope he hits for more power this season.

Scout's view

I like the Cubs. For me, they're clearly the best team in the division—if they can stay healthy. They do have guys who have been nicked up the last few years, but they've got good balance in the lineup and should have enough pitching. Their bullpen will be more than OK.

Carlos Marmol is a huge weapon out there. I know Lou Piniella really likes Geovany Soto, but I'm not sure how far he'll go with Felix Pie.



Soto can hang on to the ball. Can he do the same with Piniella's faith?

PROSPECT TO WATCH Jose Ceda, RHP. Ceda adapted to relief work, finishing with 42 strikeouts in his final 231/2 innings at Class A last season.

3rd

N.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE There's a lot of youth on the roster, and more on the way. New manager Dusty Baker hasn't always done well with young players, a reputation he can change.

BATTING ORDER

Norris Hopper, CF

Jeff Keppinger, SS

Ken Griffey, CF

Brandon Phillips, 2B

Adam Dunn, LF

Edwin Encarnacion, 3B

Scott Hatteberg, 1B

David Ross, C

ROTATION

Aaron Harang, R

Bronson Arroyo, R

Matt Belisle, R Jeremy Affeldt, L

Josh Fogg, R

SETUP / CLOSER

David Weathers, R

Jared Burton, R

Francisco Cordero, R

Hit .309 in the second half last season after returning from a demotion to the minors.

Won 16 games in 2007 even though the bullpen blew five saves behind him.

Held opponents to a .187 batting average last season.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

.407

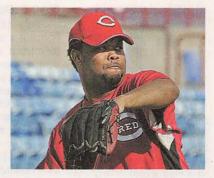
The team's winning percentage in road games last season. True, the Reds were buried by a 9-21 May, but if they're truly going to be contenders in the Central—and they should be—they must play better on the road, where they were 15 games under .500.

DON'T OVERLOOK Ken Griffey still has pop in his bat, but one of his most important contributions this season will be helping the team's up-and-coming outfielders, Chris Dickerson and Jay Bruce, one of whom could step in for him in the future. FALLING Though David Weathers had 33 saves last season, he is moving into a setup role with the signing of Francisco Cordero. If Cordero falters, Dusty Baker has the option of switching back to Weathers.

Scout's view

They really could be a surprise. Getting Francisco Cordero as closer should help them. Their bullpen was terrible last year, but Cordero gives them a guy who can close games. They are going to give up a lot of runs in that park. I really like their athletic ability.

They're getting better. I'm not sure about using Jeremy Affeldt in the rotation instead of the bullpen, but they really need help there. Aaron Harang is the only starter I'd trust.



Cordero's presence should do wonders for the Reds' bullpen.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Johnny Cueto, RHP. He has touched 97 mph on radar guns and looked good this spring against big league hitters.



2nd

N.L. West



The Rockies have plenty of home-grown young talent, but Holliday is their brightest star—and biggest bat.

DEVENEY'S TAKE The Rockies rode an epic hot streak in September to the World Series. An encore would be too much to ask.

BATTING ORDER

Willy Taveras, CF

Troy Tulowitzki, SS

Todd Helton, 1B

Matt Holliday, LF

Garrett Atkins, 3B

Brad Hawpe, RF

Jeff Baker, 2B

Yorvit Torrealba, C

ROTATION

Jeff Francis, L

Aaron Cook, R

Ubaldo Jimenez, R

Franklin Morales, L

Jason Hirsh, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Brian Fuentes, L

Luis Vizcaino, R

Manny Corpas, R

Had a .617 slugging percentage against righthanders last season.

Had a .585 slugging percentage against righthanders but only a .397 against lefties in 2007.

The team won 20 of his last 28 starts in '07.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

2

The spot in the order—a dream spot—that Troy Tulowitzki will occupy after batting toward the bottom of the order last year. He'll hit in front of Todd Helton, Matt Holliday, Garrett Atkins and Brad Hawpe, which guarantees him a lot of good pitches.

DON'T OVERLOOK Starting pitching will be key. Jeff Francis is a rock at the top of the rotation, and Aaron Cook, Ubaldo Jimenez and Franklin Morales are penciled into the next three spots. Here's the scary part: With Jason Hirsh's shoulder problems this spring, Josh Towers, Kip Wells and Mark Redman are rotation contenders. The three were 14-31 combined last season. **FALLING** With young Manny Corpas signed to a four-year contract, former closer Brian Fuentes will be searching for a

new role.

Scout's view

They've done a great job of drafting and developing. I'm not sure they're going to be able to keep all of them. I love their outfield. Matt Holliday is the best hitter in the game—I'd take him over anybody. Troy Tulowitzki is a high-quality guy, too. They had a lot of things go their way at the end of last season, and that can always turn on



The team can't keep all its young guys, but Tulowitzki is locked up.

you. I want to see what Manny Corpas does for a full season in the closer role. They've passed everyone in the division except Arizona.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Casey Weathers, RHP. The team's top pick in the 2007 draft has closer stuff and the maturity to push for a bullpen spot soon.

N.L. East

DEVENEY'S TAKE So many ways to put this team in perspective. Try this one: The Yankees will pay Andy Pettitte almost as much

to throw 30 games as the Marlins will pay their entire team to play 162.

BATTING ORDER Hanley Ramirez, SS

Dan Uggla, 2B

Jeremy Hermida, RF

Josh Willingham, LF

Mike Jacobs, 1B

Jose Castillo, 3B

Mike Rabelo, C

Cameron Maybin, CF

ROTATION

Scott Olsen, L

Andrew Miller, L

Sergio Mitre, R

Mark Hendrickson, L

Ricky Nolasco, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Matt Lindstrom, R

Kevin Gregg, R

Hit .340 with a .956 OPS in the second half

last season.

Tied for the league lead in unearned runs allowed (20) in 2007.

Justin Miller, R

highest-paid Marlin ... at \$2.5 million.

The

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

Ramirez is one of

in the game-but

the best shortstops

you wouldn't know it

from his paycheck.

Players on the Marlins' 40-man roster who were born in 1984 or later.

DON'T OVERLOOK Luis

Gonzalez can still swing the bat, and don't underestimate his impact on a young clubhouse. During his 18-year career, Gonzalez has been a struggling youngster, a traded player adjusting to a new setting and a superstar, and he's a genuinely nice guy. **FALLING** A young rotation that held so much promise has melted into a sea of injuries. The potential still is thereespecially with the addition of Andrew Miller, a future ace-but for now that rotation is an obvious weak spot.

Scout's view

The injuries to the starting pitchers really hurt them. If they don't get guys like Josh Johnson, Ricky Nolasco and Anibal Sanchez back, it's a big problem. Hanley Ramirez at shortstop is one of the best players in the game. He's put up numbers the last two years that are off the charts. He'll

butcher a few plays in the field, but I'll still take him. Dan Uggla has big power but strikes out too much. Jeremy Hermida is way better than I thought he'd be. I really missed on him.



To avoid the N.L. East cellar, the team needs to find more Hermidas.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Matt Dominguez, 3B. The team's top pick in 2007, Dominguez has the tools—especially on defense—to play at a high level.

N.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE Miguel Tejada will spend 2008 fending off federal investigators, and, if that goes well, he might also provide a big offensive boost to a remade lineup. This team will need its starters to hold up.

BATTING ORDER

Michael Bourn, CF

Kazuo Matsui, 2B

Miguel Tejada, SS

Lance Berkman, 1B

Carlos Lee, LF

Hunter Pence, RF

Ty Wigginton, 3B

J.R. Towles, C

ROTATION

Roy Oswalt, R

Chris Sampson, R

Wandy Rodriguez, L

Woody Williams, R

Brandon Backe, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Doug Brocail, R

Oscar Villarreal, R

Jose Valverde, R

His .799 OPS with the Orioles last season was 75 points higher than 2007 shortstop Mark Loretta's.

Has put up more than 110 RBIs in three consecutive seasons.

The team is 63-38 in his starts during the past three seasons.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

The difference in Lance Berkman's 2007 on-base percentage plus slugging percentage vs. his career OPS. He dropped in every offensive category last year, and he must improve because the Astros will have to outhit opponents.

DON'T OVERLOOK Kazuo

Matsui can't be the heart of the team the way Craig Biggio was, but he'll be an upgrade in other ways. He has more range than any N.L. second baseman and stole 32 bases in 104 games last season. He needs to cut down on his strikeouts and get on base more (.342 OBP).

FALLING The Astros made a splash signing Carlos Lee a year ago, and now they will pay for the decision. His production is good, but he's the worst left fielder in the N.L. and his weight is going up.

Scout's view

I don't see it happening for them. They've got too many holes and only one pitcher: Roy Oswalt. It's really an odd mix. I'm not sure what they're trying to do. I wouldn't have brought in Miguel Tejada to play short. He didn't play with any enthusiasm the last few

years with Baltimore, and now he's got the Mitchell Report mention hanging over him. Michael Bourn could really be good in center, but he's a big unknown now. He is the fastest guy in the league.



Tejada might be more trouble than signing him was worth.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Felipe Paulino, RHP. Paulino has an overpowering fastball. When he masters the mental part of the game, he will be a force.

3rd

N.L. West



DEVENEY'S TAKE The Dodgers, as usual, will enter 2008 with the most talent in the division. It's up to new manager Joe Torre to turn around the recent history of underachieving.

BATTING ORDER

Juan Pierre, LF

Rafael Furcal, SS

Russell Martin, C

Jeff Kent, 2B

Andruw Jones, CF

James Loney, 1B

Matt Kemp, RF

Nomar Garciaparra, 3B

ROTATION

Brad Penny, R

Derek Lowe, R

Chad Billingsley, R

Hiroki Kuroda, R

Esteban Loaiza, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Jonathan Broxton, R Joe Beimel, L

Takashi Saito, R

Hit a National League-best .419 with runners in scoring position last season.

Was 3-3 with a 4.00 ERA in his final 12 starts last year.

Produced the lowest opponents' batting average (.151) among N.L. relievers in 2007.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

35

Home runs hit by Dodgers outfielders last season, fewest in the National League. pon't overlook Jeff Kent has driven in fewer than 80 runs in each of the past two seasons. But that doesn't sway the opinion of Braves manager Bobby Cox, who calls Kent one of the best clutch hitters in the game.

FALLING The five-year contract the team gave Juan Pierre before last season looks like a major blunder. Pierre has not approached his production of 2004, when he hit .326. He has no power, and runners routinely take advantage of his weak arm in the outfield.

Scout's view

Joe Torre is a very, very good manager, but I'm not sure he'll be good with this mix. They've got a lot of really good kids, and Joe is better with veterans. Russell Martin is the best catcher in the league, a superstar. Matt Kemp is going to be a star if they don't mess with him. He plays like Garret Anderson. It looks like he's not trying,

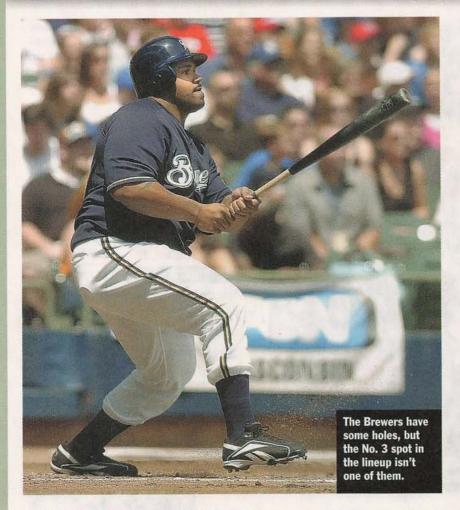
but that's because he's so talented and graceful. James Loney is very good, and he'll hit for more power. They should put Chad Billingsley in the rotation and keep him there.



Loney is just a kid, but the Dodgers are expecting big things from him.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Chin-Lung Hu, SS. Hu, from Taiwan, is a smooth fielder who's less than a year away from taking over at shortstop.

BREWERS BREWERS



DEVENEY'S TAKE Even with all the improvements this team made to its offense and defense, it's hard to see how it can contend when its bullpen is so full of holes.

BATTING ORDER

Rickie Weeks, 2B

Mike Cameron, CF

Prince Fielder, 1B

Ryan Braun, LF

Corey Hart, RF

Bill Hall, 3B

Bill Hall, 36

J.J. Hardy, SS

Jason Kendall, C

ROTATION

Ben Sheets, R

Jeff Suppan, R

Carlos Villanueva, R

Dave Bush, R

Chris Capuano, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Derrick Turnbow, R

David Riske, R

Eric Gagne, R

Had the second-best OPS in the N.L. last season at 1.013.

Had laser eye surgery to try to halt a steep decline on offense.

Who needs fielders? Had 11.12 strikeouts and 6.09 walks per nine innings in 2007.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS



The team's slugging percentage with the bases loaded last season, the highest mark in the National League by 50 points.

DON'T OVERLOOK Rickie Weeks hit only .235 in '07, but when his wrist finally healed he played at a high level. In the final two months, he hit .273 with a .553 slugging percentage and 15 consecutive stolen bases. The Brewers believe Weeks can do that for an entire season.

FALLING Ben Sheets has made fewer than 25 starts, pitched fewer than 160 innings and spent time on the disabled list in each of the past three seasons. Sheets, 29, still can be an elite starter, but he must stay healthy.

Scout's view

They're going to be interesting again, but this time they won't sneak up on anybody. The big question for me is that bullpen. It could turn out to be great. Or horrible. There probably won't be an in-between. That's not a good park for Eric Gagne because the ball really flies there. I love their young players. I wonder if they've got too many guys out of position with Ryan Braun going to left and Bill Hall going to third. The manager, Ned Yost, got too uptight down the stretch last year. He could be in trouble if they have a slow start.

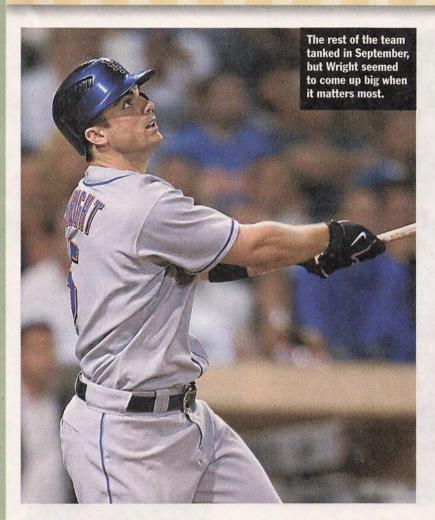
Braun will be catching a lot more balls in the air this season.



PROSPECT TO WATCH Manny Parra, LHP. He is close to sticking in the bigs after going 10-4 with a 2.45 ERA at Class AA and AAA last year.

2nd

N.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE Adding Johan Santana is, obviously, a boon for the pitching staff. But a spate of spring injuries revealed the weaknesses that could cause this team to stumble—too much age and too little depth.

BATTING ORDER

Jose Reyes, SS

Luis Castillo, 2B

David Wright, 3B

Carlos Beltran, CF

Moises Alou, LF

Carlos Delgado, 1B

Ryan Church, LF

Brian Schneider, C

ROTATION

Johan Santana, L

Pedro Martinez, R

Orlando Hernandez, R

John Maine, R

Oliver Perez, L

SETUP / CLOSER

Aaron Heilman, R

Pedro Feliciano, L

Billy Wagner, L

Hit .352 with a .602 slugging percentage last September.

His strikeouts went up by 12 (to 111) and his OPS went down by 104 points (to .878) as the team flopped last season.

Has a career record of 16-4 with a 2.27 ERA against N.L. teams.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

.279

Jose Reyes' on-base percentage last September. The slump intensified criticism of his on-field antics. In response, Reyes vowed to tone things down and become more focused. The club also needs him to be more consistent.

DON'T OVERLOOK Duaner Sanchez is trying to come back from two shoulder surgeries that have kept him out since July 2006. If he regains his velocity and durability, he'll make the setup crew even deeper.

FALLING Carlos Delgado wants to prove 2007 was an aberration, but he is already behind schedule because of a hip problem. None of the potential internal options—Marlon Anderson, Jose Valentin and Olmedo Saenz—can match Delgado's power output.

Scout's view

Getting Johan Santana obviously helps them because it drops everybody down one spot in the rotation. But they're still counting on two old guys in Pedro Martinez and El Duque. There's a lot of risk with that. John Maine somehow gets it done with all fastballs, but if you're counting on Mike Pelfrey, count me out. David

Wright is a great player at third, but the shortstop, Jose Reyes, was not the same guy last year. He was careless and played with no bounce or enthusiasm.



Maine doesn't have great stuff, but he gets the job done.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Fernando Martinez, OF. He needs to refine his swing, track balls better in the outfield and stay healthy, but he's the real deal.

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES

PREDICTED FINISH

1st

N.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE A speedy and full recovery for new closer Brad Lidge is a necessity for the bullpen, but this team's powerful offense can carry it through just about anything.

BATTING ORDER

Jimmy Rollins, SS

Shane Victorino, CF

Chase Utley, 2B

Ryan Howard, 1B

Pat Burrell, LF

Jayson Werth, RF

Pedro Feliz, 3B

Carlos Ruiz, C

ROTATION

Brett Myers, R

Cole Hamels, L

Kyle Kendrick, R

Jamie Moyer, L

Adam Eaton, R

SETUP / CLOSER

J.C. Romero, L

Tom Gordon, R

Brad Lidge, R

His average dropped 45 points to .268 and his strikeouts rose to a MLB-

record 199 last season.

The club scored eight or more runs in eight of his 20 starts last year.

Allowed a .520 slugging percentage in 2007, highest among N.L. starters.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

892

Runs by the Phillies in 2007, the most by any N.L. team in the past four seasons.

DON'T OVERLOOK Pat Burrell is more important to the lineup than you think. His .400 on-base percentage was second among regulars to only Chase Utley's .410 last season, and he drove in 97 runs. That kind of protection for Ryan Howard is key.

FALLING Other than Cole Hamels, the rotation raises questions. Brett Myers is moving back to the rotation. Kyle Kendrick is young, and his unexpected success of '07 has been forgotten in the wake of a dismal spring. Adam Eaton was woeful when healthy and already has back problems.

Scout's view

I'll take the Phillies, and you can have everybody else and have a hard time beating me at first base, (Ryan Howard), second base, (Chase Utley), and shortstop (Jimmy Rollins). You don't have to like third baseman Pedro Feliz, but he'll be 20-90 at the end of the year with good defense. Pat Burrell takes a beating, and it's not fair. He

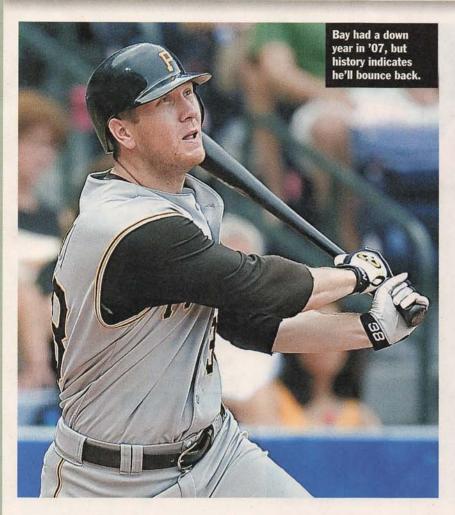
won't win a Gold Glove, but he's productive. The pitching is OK, but they've got a real problem if Brad Lidge can't close. If he thought they were hard on him in Houston, wait until he blows one in Philly.



Feliz isn't Howard or Rollins, but he doesn't need to be.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Joe Savery, LHP. He will be on a fast track because of his experience in Rice University's high-quality program.

N.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE This team has some good young pitchers, but it's tough to identify the players it plans to build around. Jason Bay? Xavier Nady? Uh, I don't think so.

BATTING ORDER

Nate McLouth, CF

Jack Wilson, SS

Freddy Sanchez, 2B

Adam LaRoche, 1B

Jason Bay, LF

Xavier Nady, RF

Jose Bautista, 3B

Ronny Paulino, C

ROTATION

Tom Gorzelanny, L

Ian Snell, R

Zach Duke, L

Paul Maholm, L

Matt Morris, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Damaso Marte, L

Franquelis Osoria, R

Matt Capps, R

Hit only .227 with a .406 slugging percentage against lefthanders

last year.

Induced the most double plays among N.L. pitchers in 2007.

Allowed only 1.82 walks per nine innings last year.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

69.8

The Pirates have averaged less than 70 wins over the last five seasons, which seems bad enough, but they could struggle to reach that mark this season.

DON'T OVERLOOK Having risen quickly to reach the majors in 2005, Paul Maholm won eight games in 2006 and 10 last year. Yet he has been strangely in the background because ace Tom Gorzelanny (14-10) was the only starter with a winning record in '07 and because the focus has been on Zach Duke, who's trying to overcome his slide from an 8-2 season in '05 to 10-15 in '06 and 3-8 last season.

FALLING Xavier Nady's time in Pittsburgh is winding down. If he proves he can stay healthy, look for him to be dealt for prospects the organization so badly needs.

Scout's view

They've really got a long way to go. They've done a terrible job drafting. Their top picks have had so much trouble that you wonder if they're just snakebit. I like their starting pitching, especially Tom Gorzelanny. They need to find a way to fix Zach Duke. He's got no

deception in his delivery. Maybe the change in management will help this team. I know John Russell will get the most he can out of them. They got really sloppy last season. John won't stand for that.



Someone other than Gorzelanny needs to win for the team to improve.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Nyjer Morgan, OF. Last season, he hit .308 in rookie ball, .305 in Class AAA and .299 with the Pirates in September.

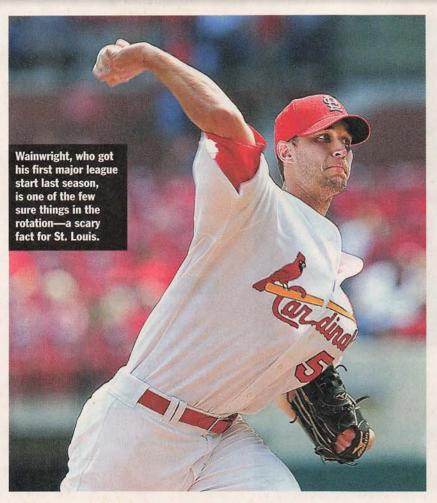


ST.LOUIS CARDINALS

PREDICTED FINISH

5th

N.L. Central



DEVENEY'S TAKE No starting pitching, no outfield and, possibly, no healthy ligaments in Albert Pujols' elbow. This is shaping up to be a disastrous season in St. Louis.

BATTING ORDER

Adam Kennedy, 2B

Rick Ankiel, CF

Albert Puiols, 1B

Troy Glaus, 3B

Chris Duncan, LF

Yadier Molina, C

Skip Schumaker, RF

Cesar Izturis, SS

ROTATION

Adam Wainright, R

Braden Looper, R

Joel Pineiro, R

Anthony Reyes, R

Todd Wellemeyer, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Ryan Franklin, R

Russ Springer, R

Jason Isringhausen, R

Averaged an RBI for every 4.41 at-bats last season, the fourth-best ratio in the N.L.

Opponents hit .308 against him in the first inning last year.

Had the lowest walk rate among N.L. relievers in 2007: 1.24 per nine innings.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

78

Wins the Cardinals had last season, their fewest since 1999. Little was done to improve the team in the offseason.

DON'T OVERLOOK Crazy as this sounds, don't overlook Albert Pujols. Yes, his elbow is in bad shape, and yes, the prudent action probably would be to have surgery now. But Pujols is still capable of producing his standard .330-40-120 season, and knowing everyone is counting him out for this season will motivate him.

FALLING The middle infield situation is bleak. Adam Kennedy was pretty awful in St. Louis last season, and Cesar Izturis wasn't much better. The group's offensive and defensive production leave much to be desired.

Scout's view

It's going to be a long, long year. I was really surprised manager Tony La Russa came back for this. They don't have any team speed, and they don't have anybody who can really protect Albert Pujols in the lineup. Third baseman Troy Glaus can do that when he feels like playing, but he

doesn't always feel like playing. Rick Ankiel can be pitched to. There are just a lot of things lacking on this team, and they can't look for much help from their system.

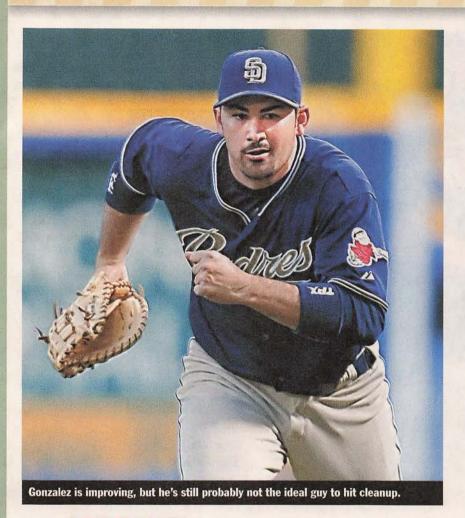


Trouble with Pujols' elbow means trouble for the Cards.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Colby Rasmus, OF. He led the Class AA Texas League in home runs with 29 last year but needs seasoning in Class AAA.

4th

N.L. West



DEVENEY'S TAKE The Padres are desperately trying to find three healthy bodies to put in the outfield every night. Counting on worndown Jim Edmonds in center field is not a good start.

BATTING ORDER

Brian Giles, RF

Tadahito Iguchi, 2B Kevin Kouzmanoff, 3B

Adrian Gonzalez, 1B

Autian donzalez, 11

Khalil Greene, SS

Jim Edmonds, CF Scott Hairston, LF

Josh Bard, C

ROTATION

Jake Peavy, R

Chris Young, R

Greg Maddux, R

Randy Wolf, L

Justin Germano, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Heath Bell, R

Cla Meredith, R

Trevor Hoffman, R

Made a big improvement in the second half last year: .317 batting average and .890 OPS.

Catcher ERA of 3.41 was best for N.L. starters last season. Pitchers love throwing to him.

Held opponents to a .192 batting average last season, the best among N.L. starters.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

3.02

San Diego's ERA at home in 2007, the best mark in the major leagues by more than half a run.

DON'T OVERLOOK Adrian Gonzalez is developing a power swing to both gaps. In his second full season, he raised his totals for homers (24 to 30), RBIs (82 to 100) and extra-base hits (63 to 79) while being forced into the cleanup spot by default. **FALLING** Trevor Hoffman, 40, is a great closer, but maybe his age is catching up with him. He had 42 saves, and his numbers weren't far off his career stats last year. But, he could not close the two games the Padres had to win to make the playoffs.

Scout's view

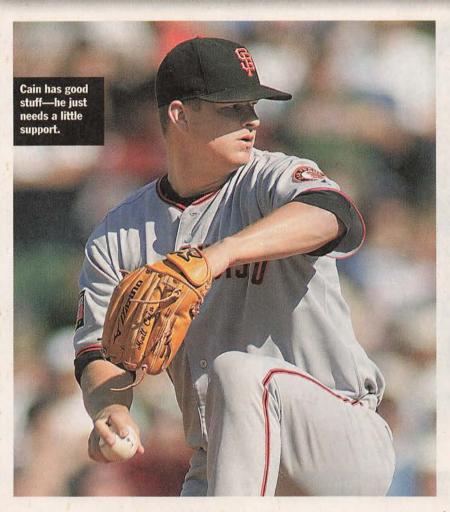
They'll pitch well, and that's about it. They'll be lucky to finish third in the division. Their outfield is terrible. Brian Giles is a great guy, but it's just not there anymore. If there's a runner at second, he can find a way to drive him in, but his power is gone. They'll be lucky if Jim Edmonds plays 100 games, and he won't be very good when he's out there. Adrian Gonzalez would be better if he had some guys around him. He'd be a good No. 3 or 5 hitter, but they've got to hit him cleanup.



After Young and the rest of the staff, there isn't much here.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Chase Headley, OF. Headley, who has an exceptional grasp of the strike zone, is moving from third base to left field.

N.L. West



DEVENEY'S TAKE They have an abundance of brilliant young pitchers, but the lineup is packed with geriatrics who can't hit for power. Scoring runs figures to be a big problem.

BATTING ORDER

Dave Roberts, LF

Omar Vizguel, SS

Randy Winn, RF

Bengie Molina, C

Aaron Rowand, CF

Ray Durham, 2B

Daniel Ortmeier, 1B

Kevin Frandsen, 3B

ROTATION

Barry Zito, L

Matt Cain, R

Noah Lowry, L

Tim Lincecum, R

Kevin Correia, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Tyler Walker, R

Steve Kline, L

Brian Wilson, R

Had the N.L.'s lowest OPS

(.621) last season.

Had the N.L.'s second-lowest OPS (.638) in '07.

Received an N.L.-low 3.51 runs per start

in 2007.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

RBIs by Giants' cleanup hitters last season, the fewest in the major leagues from that spot.

DON'T OVERLOOK The Giants will benefit from the Phillies' decision not to sign Aaron Rowand. He should supply offense, and he brings an additional asset: grit. Now that Bonds is gone, the team can regain its focus. Rowand's work ethic and intensity will set an example for teammates.

FALLING Ray Durham's production slowed to a crawl last season, when he finished with career-low numbers in batting average, on-base percentage and slugging percentage. Even his range at second base diminished noticeably.



Scout's view

Terrible. They've got some good starting pitching, but all that means is they'll lose a lot of 2-1 games. There's no power and no speed in this lineup. I can't blame Brian Sabean for this. His hands have been tied by ownership for years because of Barry Bonds. Sabean is smart. He didn't want to put all that money into Bonds, but ownership made him do it. I just hope Peter Magowan remembers that when this team loses 95 games and doesn't fire Brian.

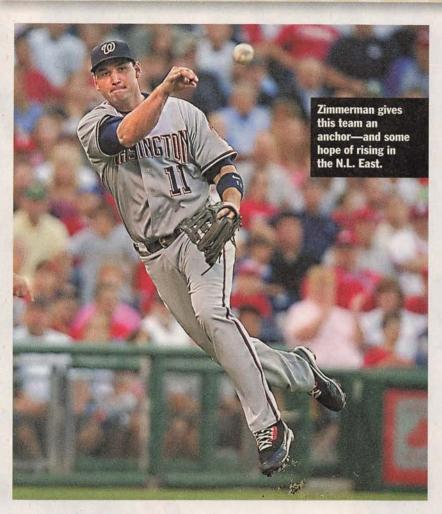
PROSPECT TO WATCH Nate Schierholtz, OF. He is the closest prospect to the majors in a farm system that has suffered from neglect.

WASHINGTON NATIONALS

PREDICTED FINISH

4th

N.L. East



DEVENEY'S TAKE Glimmering new Nationals Park is a big positive, as are young hitters Ryan Zimmerman and Lastings Milledge. Now, about that starting pitching . . .

BATTING ORDER

Cristian Guzman, SS Lastings Milledge, CF

Ryan Zimmerman, 3B

Nick Johnson, 1B

Austin Kearns, RF

Elijah Dukes, LF

Paul Lo Duca, C

Ronnie Belliard, 2B

ROTATION

Odalis Perez, L

John Patterson, R

Tim Redding, R

Jason Bergmann, R

Shawn Hill, R

SETUP / CLOSER

Jon Rauch, R

Jesus Colome, R

Chad Cordero, R

Has only 24 homers and 110 RBIs in 799 at-bats since

being acquired

from the Reds.

His .190 average last season does not accurately reflect his untapped potential.

Was limited to 15 starts over the past two seasons because of nerve problems in his arm.

NUMBER THAT COUNTS

Times in the past decade this franchise has finished in either fourth or fifth place in the N.L. East. Breaking that trend this season will be a tall order.

DON'T OVERLOOK Nick Johnson's bat wasn't missed

last year because Dmitri Young was making an amazing comeback. But Johnson is healthy, and he's light-years better than Young with the glove. This is a battle that even a healthy Young, who has been slowed by injury, can't win. **FALLING** John Patterson says he's healthy, but he didn't make it past early May either of the past two years. The No. 1 starter job is there for the taking, and Patterson must prove he's durable enough and ready to claim it.

Scout's view

Their best pitchers—Shawn Hill and John Patterson—can't answer the bell. You can't count on them. Paul Lo Duca won't help the staff. Ryan Zimmerman is a little overrated for me. He got his numbers by the end of the year, but you should get numbers if you have 600 at-bats. He's got the

heebie-jeebies on his throws. Austin Kearns isn't the greatest attitude guy, and now they've got Lastings Milledge and Elijah Dukes. This thing could really blow up on them.



Now that Johnson is healthy, the first base job is all his.

PROSPECT TO WATCH Ross Detwiler, LHP. He likely will start the year in the minors, though he might get a chance to develop in the big league 'pen.

Sure, Houston has been hot in the second half ... but the playoffs are a different story.

These Rockets will come back to earth

By Stan McNeal

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irst, an admission. When Yao Ming's season came to its unfortunate end, I wrote that the Rockets were done. I figured they had as much chance of reaching the playoffs as Tracy McGrady has of playing an entire season without missing a game.

Well, all together now: You big dummy. All the Rockets did in their first 10 games post-Yao was go unbeaten and extend their winning streak to 22, second-best in league history.

By banding together like a college team on a March Madness roll, the Rockets were actually playing better without their best player.

They have showcased stifling defense, enjoyed impressive stretches from point guard Rafer Alston and small forward Shane Battier, gotten huge boosts from rookie forwards Luis Scola and Carl Landry, watched coach Rick Adelman become the favorite for coach of the year and seen McGrady work his way into MVP consideration.

But if they're so dang great, why does everyone outside of Houston think they have as much of a chance of coming out of the West as a No. 16 seed has of winning this weekend?

I talked to a dozen scouts, players and league insiders last week and the best I could get was, "You can't count them out." The Spurs had lost five of six entering the week but remain the popular choice to win the conference. Only two other teams were given much of a chance—the Lakers, though their hopes rest on the magical words: "If Andrew Bynum ..." and the Suns, with this consideration: "I haven't given up on Shaq making them better."

But no one gives the Rockets a shot. "A very



McGrady and the Rockets look strong now, but the playoffs have a way of revealing weaknesses.

good team, a great story and I'm happy for them. But they're just not good enough," one league insider says. "They could win 30 in a row and I still wouldn't like their chances," says another.

The biggest reason for such a lack of love is simple: the absence of Houston's 7-6 center. Without Yao in the postseason, too much would fall on McGrady. "Tracy's not Superman. He's more Batman and Robin," an advance scout says. "He's going to struggle at some point in a seven-game series, and that's when they'll miss their big fella."

A lack of scoring without Yao was one of the reasons I thought the Rockets would drop out of the playoff picture. Another was the uncertainty that follows McGrady. You never know when a sore back, a bum knee or a tweaked hangnail will put him in street clothes. Well, the Rockets have scored more without Yao (101.3 points per game compared with 96.3 before the injury), and McGrady has not missed a game since January.

Perhaps I'll be wrong again. Sure, and maybe a No. 16 seed will win a game this weekend.

With less than a month to go in the regular season, teams are already compiling offseason wish lists. What does your team need? Find out at sportingnews.com when Stan McNeal begins previewing the summer shopping season.





Throwing a match on the fuel

After inserting 27-year-old rookie Luis Scola into the starting lineup, the Rockets won 22 of their next 23 games. But if you're looking for Scola to take credit, keep looking.

SN: How do you explain the team's run since you became a starter?

SCOLA: We have many good players, and we have been playing hard without Yao. The good thing about this team is when somebody's missing, somebody else is going to step up.

SN: What about your impact since becoming a starter?

SCOLA: My role hasn't changed, other than I warm up differently. It wasn't a big deal when I was a backup and everyone was asking me when I was going to start, so I can't make it a big deal now that I am starting.

SN: Were you surprised when you were playing for Argentina last summer and were named MVP of the Tournament of the Americas even though Team USA won the gold?

SCOLA: I was happy to get it, but if they had given it to Kobe, LeBron or Carmelo, that would have been very fair, too.

SN: Argentine players are known for their toughness and energy. Where does that come from?

SCOLA: I don't have an answer for that. I can tell you it's not just our basketball players who are like that, but our soccer players also are known for always playing hard. That's the way it is.

SN: What's the biggest difference between playing in the NBA and the Spanish League, where you were a two-time MVP?

SCOLA: Players are faster, taller and jump higher (in the NBA).

SN: Oh, is that it?

SCOLA: And the rules are different. It's difficult getting used to the 3-point line and 3 seconds. And it has taken a while to get used to being in a new country—different language, different food.

SN: What would be better, winning another Olympic gold medal for Argentina or winning a ring with the Rockets?

SCOLA: I want to win both. **SN:** How about either?

SCOLA: Yeah. I would take that.

Because of his pencilthin physique, Pistons SF Tayshaun Prince is an improbable successor to Spurs SF Bruce Bowen as the owner of the longest active streak of games

started at 339 (76ers PG Andre Miller is first in consecutive games played). Prince, however, is a beneficiary of the unique training methods of Pistons trainer Arnie Kander, who puts his players through daily regimens focused on basketball movements. Kander, for example, does not want his players too flexible. "If a guy shows me he can put his nose to his knee, I say, 'Oh, no. Don't do that," Kander says. "When was the last time you saw someone do that in a basketball game?" > When Bowen was suspended last week, it exposed a Spurs weakness: depth at small forward. With Bowen out, San Antonio at times used three point guards against the Pistons. > The Nuggets began the week 13 games over .500 and with the fourthbest record in franchise history after 65 games. But a Western Conference exec would not be surprised to see them miss the playoffs, in part because of a lack of leadership. "Carmelo Anthony and Allen Iverson are not necessarily the follow-meand-do-as-I-do types," he says. > A Trail Blazers insider said weeks ago that C Greg Oden would be ready to play by the end of the season. Oden has been practicing, and observers say he looks quick, fit and powerful. He still will not play this season, but there's little doubt the No. 1 pick in 2007 will be ready for summer league action. > Clippers PF Elton Brand (Achilles') remains optimistic he will play this season, but PG Shaun Livingston likely won't because of tendinitis in his surgically repaired left knee. Livingston still refuses to watch replays of the gruesome injury he suffered last season. > A word of caution to Wizards PG Gilbert Arenas and the rest of the big-name players who can



become free agents this summer: "They should think hard about that. Only a couple of teams are going to have money," an Eastern Conference exec says. "Free agency

isn't what it used to be." > Blazers SG Brandon Roy got the first technical of his NBA career last weekend. When the Rose Garden crowd booed a disputed foul after watching the replay, Roy turned to an official and said, "Hear that? Boo!" and was immediately T'd up. "I could have said something better if I knew I was going to get one," Roy told *The Oregonian*.

Thanks to the Pistons' training methods, Prince doesn't get many days off.



speedreads

If David Stern cared about franchise stability as much as he wants us to believe, he would not give up on keeping the Sonics in Seattle.

opt out of their eight-figure salaries and

Congrats to LeBron for scoring the cover of Vogue. I guess he truly will have arrived when he gets People. It's playoffs or bust for the Browns.

Winning now—is that so wrong?

By Clifton Brown

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hil Savage might as well skip Saturday at the NFL draft—catch a movie, wash his car, clean out the garage. He traded away all the Browns' high picks, which leaves Cleveland as the only NFL team without a choice in the first three rounds.

And leaves Savage squarely out on a limb.

The only way for the Browns' general manager to justify gutting his draft is to make the playoffs this season. Which is exactly what he has in mind.

Weird as it sounds, the Browns are contenders. They can win the AFC North, a division that is up

for grabs, if they improve a sorry defense that ranked 30th in the NFL last season. The Ravens are rebuilding. The Bengals have problems on defense and in the locker room. The Steelers did nothing to improve themselves during free agency, though there is nothing unusual about that.

Coming off a 10-6 season, Savage saw this window of opportunity and went to work. Though he had already traded this year's first-round pick (No. 22) to get quarterback Brady Quinn last year, Savage kept dealing. He got defensive tackle Corey Williams from the Packers for a second-rounder, then snagged defensive tackle Shaun Rogers from the Lions for a third-rounder and cornerback Leigh Bodden.

Bold moves, for sure, but smart ones. Winning now is the right mindset for the Browns and the right message to send their fans. The Browns have made just one playoff appearance since the franchise returned to Cleveland in 1999. Fans are tired of waiting—and clearly, Savage is, too.

"It is time for us to take another step, and I think the moves that we made put us in position to do that," he says.

The Browns have put their money where their goals are. They re-signed quarterback Derek Anderson. They re-signed running back Jamal Lewis. They signed free-agent wide receiver Donte' Stallworth.

Offense should not be a problem; it wasn't one last season when the Browns averaged 25.1 points (eighth in the league). But something had to be done with the defense, and because the Browns are

unlikely to get much help in the later rounds of the draft—a draft that is thin at defensive tackle—Williams and Rogers must deliver.

This is the Browns' biggest risk—counting on Rogers. He was a Pro Bowl player in 2004 and 2005, but lately his play has been marked by inconsistency and weight issues. Rogers is listed at 340

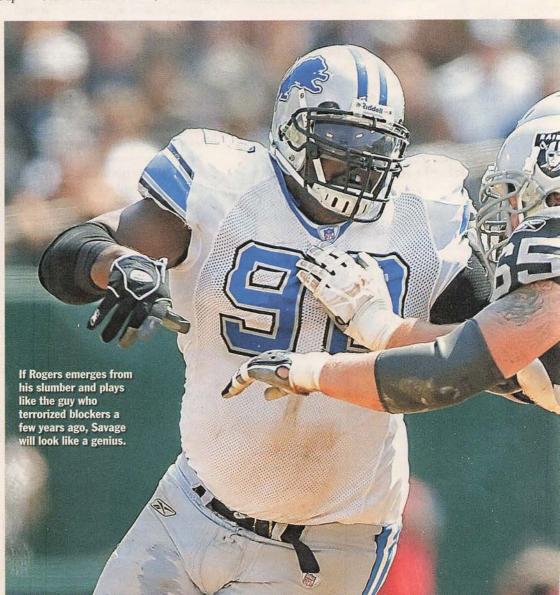
pounds. If Rogers is 340 pounds, so is a minivan.

Not only did the Browns trade for Rogers, they gave him a six-year, \$42 million contract. That can buy a lot of Twinkies. But Savage believes Romeo Crennel, a former defensive line coach and coordinator with the Patriots, can get Rogers to maximize his talent instead of his waistline.

"If we had an offensive coordinator head coach who never touched the defense, I would be more apprehensive to make a trade like this, for a guy who's had some issues," says Savage. "I think he'll

> get the most out of this player. And if he can, there's no one in the defensive line draft who could even come close in the third round to being able to do what this guy's going to be able to do."

Savage believes Crennel
can get Rogers to
maximize his talent
instead of his waistline.



Banking on Rogers is better than banking on a third-round pick. Since becoming the Browns' general manager, Savage has made two thirdround picks-quarterback Charlie Frye and wide receiver Travis Wilson. Frye is no longer with the Browns. Wilson has caught two passes in two years. "I'm not proud of that track record," says Savage. "Heck, I'd have never gotten this job based on third-rounders."

If Rogers plays poorly and the Browns' defense doesn't improve, they will have a difficult time making the playoffs. But he was worth taking a chance on. The Browns still have all of their draft picks in 2009, so Savage has not mortgaged their entire future. He simply sacrificed this year's draft.

"George Allen used to trade draft picks all the time when he coached the Redskins," says former Packers general manager Ron Wolf. "It worked out pretty well for him."

Watching the draft will be boring for Browns fans, but watching next season should be fun. And there's nothing wrong with that.

speed reads

Don't be alarmed by Oregon running back Jonathan Stewart's turf toe surgery. He should be at full strength with no lingering effects by Week 1, and he should still be a first-round pick, though now closer to the bottom of the

Signing quarterback Mark Brunell was a good move for the Saints. Now if Drew Brees gets hurt, maybe they can still win a few games.

Guess the Buccaneers can never have enough quarterbacks. Their latest addition is Brian Griese. Who's next. Bob Griese?

The draft can't come soon enough for Kentucky quarterback Andre' Woodson. The more scouts see, the more his stock plummets.

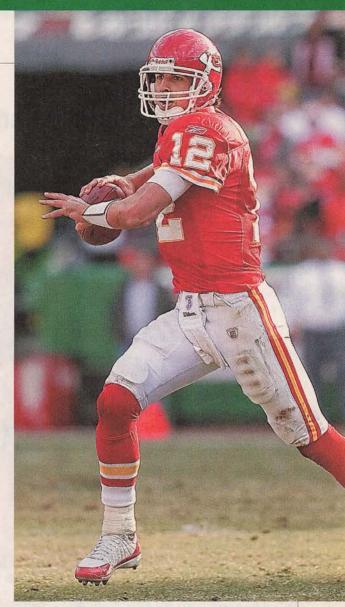
ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Been thinking much about the Patriots since their upset loss in Arizona? Dennis Dillon checks in on the defending AFC champs at sportingnews.com.



With Eli Manning starting every game the past three seasons, the Giants have not needed a reliable backup quarterback. But they signed David Carr as an insurance policy in case Manning's luck changes. Carr, the No. 1 pick in the 2002 draft, was a bust with the Texans and then the Panthers last season, but the Giants hope quarterbacks coach Chris Palmer can work his magic on him. Palmer, who was offensive coordinator in Houston when Carr was there, has been instrumental in improving Manning's footwork and throwing mechanics. > The abrupt firing of Broncos G.M. Ted Sundquist the month before the draft puts even more pressure on coach Mike Shanahan. Shanahan has always had final say over personnel moves, but Sundquist was a trusted advisor, having spent 16 years with the team, the final six as general manager. Because of Shanahan's close relationship with owner Pat Bowlen and the two Super Bowl trophies Denver proudly displays, he has

enjoyed rare job security. But the Broncos have won only one playoff game since QB John Elway retired in 1999, and they have missed the playoffs the past two years. If the Broncos have another poor season, Shanahan will get even more of the blame. > Despite his uncertain future with the Chiefs, QB Brodie Croyle purchased a home in the Kansas City area and has been working out regularly at the team's facility. The Chiefs may be forced to go with Croyle as the starter, especially if Boston College's Matt Ryan is drafted before the team picks at No. 5. It will be difficult for the Chiefs to justify taking any other quarterback that high, considering they need help at so many other positions. Croyle knows this could be his make-or-break season, and he hopes his offseason work will help him secure the starting job during training camp. > Josh McCown should keep some phone numbers for moving companies on



Croyle is getting settled in new digs in K.C. while also trying to solidify a home in the Chiefs' starting lineup.

speed dial. The Dolphins are McCown's fourth team in four seasons after stints with the Cardinals, Lions and Raiders. But if the Dolphins do not take Ryan with the No. 1 pick, McCown has a shot to become the team's starting quarterback next season. John Beck, a 2007 secondround pick, has not solidified his place as the starter, and McCown could win the job and keep it until Bill Parcells lands his quarterback of the future. > In four of the past five drafts, the Lions have taken a wide receiver in the first round. But even Matt Millen should be able to resist that urge this year. Cutting Kevin Jones makes the Lions more likely to draft a running back with the No. 15 pick. The draft is deep at that position, and both Rashard Mendenhall of Illinois and Felix Jones of Arkansas could be available. The Lions are expected to run more this season with Jim Colletto replacing Mike Martz as coordinator.



FILM ROOM By Greg Cosell

Dorsey will be a handful for NFL blockers

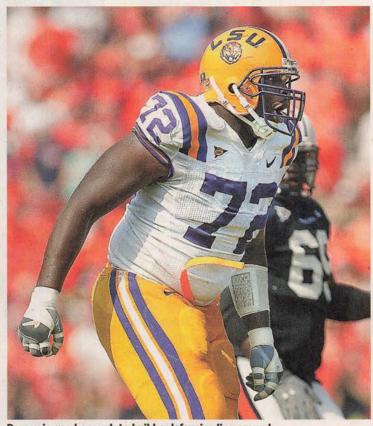
Glenn Dorsey will be a dominant defensive tackle in the NFL. I studied the 2007 LSU defense, and Dorsey was as impressive as any interior lineman I've seen in recent years.

The first thing that jumped off Dorsey's film was his athleticism. He is an extraordinary athlete who just happens to play defensive tackle. After a number of games, I tended to forget that I was watching a 297-pound man. He moved like a much lighter player.

LSU aligned Dorsey at many different positions on its defensive front, including end in its threeman line, but he will transition best to the NFL as a 3 technique tackle. The 3 technique predominantly aligns in the gap between the guard and tackle and attacks that gap at the snap. Dorsey has exceptional burst and acceleration out of his stance, much like Tommie Harris of the Bears. His explosiveness projects extremely well to the NFL.

As does his technique. The tape shows he played with tremendous leverage, keeping his pad level low

so that his natural power and strength were not compromised. Dorsey's ability to consistently play with leverage allowed him to hold his ground and stalemate double-team blocks. And that is a criti-



Dorsey is good enough to build a defensive line around.

cal trait for an NFL defensive tackle.

There were many times when Dorsey not only deadlocked double-teams but defeated them and made the tackle. And that highlighted another quality that he consistently displayed: the ability to use his hands and arms to keep blockers from getting into his body. That's about technique, and Dorsey was far ahead of most college defensive linemen in that area.

When I evaluate defensive tackles, I look for balance and footwork. Dorsey was outstanding in both areas. In fact, what really stood out was he was rarely on the ground. That allowed him to stay alive and make plays in pursuit down the line of scrimmage, at times near the sideline. That is something you don't see often from defensive tackles.

Dorsey combines great athleticism with a high-intensity motor that never stops. If he can overcome an injury history that may scare some teams, he will be the kind of player around whom an NFL defensive front can be built.

Greg Cosell of NFL Films analyzes coaching tape and is executive producer of State Farm NFL Matchup.

SNAPSHOT Andre' Woodson, QB, Kentucky

Andre' Woodson was all the rage last season, when Kentucky beat eventual national champion LSU in triple overtime, then finished the season with its second straight Music City Bowl win. There was talk Woodson could be a first-round draft choice, but that is far less likely after a start to the offseason in which he struggled at the Senior Bowl and his pro day. Woodson, however, remains optimistic that a strong NFL career awaits him.

My breakthrough moment as a college player: Winning the Music City Bowl the first year. That (a bowl win) hadn't been done in 22 years at Kentucky.

My best memory from college: Beating the national champions.

My college stats fail to show: I'm really calm and poised in the pocket. Stats don't show that, but when you watch film, you can just tell how real mellow I am. And when I get the ball out, nothing really bothers me. I just do a good job standing there reading and going through and trying to deliver the football.

The part of my game that will need the most work in the NFL: I really wouldn't say there's much. Obviously, you can

continue to get better with everything you do, and I think the pro coaches will be the biggest judges of that and help me out.

Five years from now, I will be known as: Hopefully, someone who went to the next level and succeeded in life and just continued to step up to adversity and tried to overcome it.

War Room scouts view

Woodson has the tools to be a good NFL quarterback but must greatly improve his mechanics and accuracy. Sometimes, he does everything right and becomes a game-changing player who can carry a team. He must improve significantly on the fundamentals to turn his natural talent into production. If Woodson gets drafted as high as the fourth round, it will be based on his potential.

For detailed analysis of hundreds of prospects, go to sportingnews.com/nfl.



After a zany beginning to the Sprint Cup season, a week off is in order. Now, can anybody get this show back on track?

Gentlemen, recalibrate your engines

By Mike Hembree

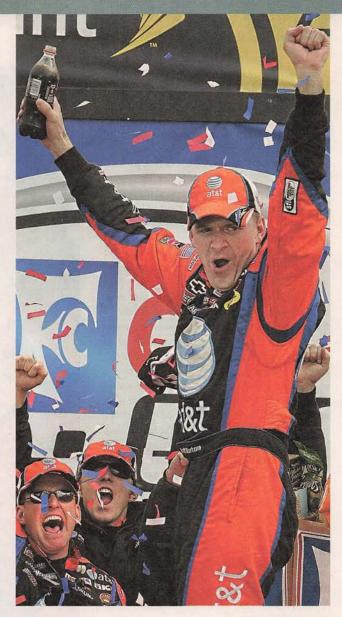
ASCAR's so-called offseason is laughably short, and much of the time that's supposedly down is eaten up with car- and engine-building, tuning, testing and other tasks performed to prepare for the coming season.

Then the year begins with six jampacked weeks: two events at Daytona International Speedway, followed by intermediate-track races at California, Las Vegas and Atlanta and then the first short-track race of the season at Bristol. It's a lot for drivers and teams to absorb in barely a month, and that's in just an average year.

This year, of course, has been anything but average, and virtually everybody associated with the sport welcomes this week's traditional break for Easter so that batteries—both literal and figurative—can be recharged.

So how zany has the season been?

Well, after a 2007 season in which the sport's top Chevrolet team-Hendrick Motorsports-won half the Cup races, no Chevrolet driver had tasted victory through the first four Cup events. Then Richard Childress Racing's Chevys swept the top three spots at Bristol. Toyota got its first win on a day when its top driver, Tony Stewart, ranted that the tires provided for racing weren't, in effect, good enough to become a superzealous fan's coffee table. Ryan Newman scored a surprise win at Daytona. Carl Edwards won two straight races but was caught with his hand in the oil tank at Las Vegas and was hit with one of the sport's biggest penalties, which ignited a miniwar of words between two key racing executives-Edwards' boss Jack Roush and



For Burton and his Childress teammates, breaking the Chevy victory drought was as easy as 1-2-3 at Bristol.



Toyota general manager Lee White. Jeff Gordon had a brutal crash at Las Vegas, sparking criticism of the track's safety standards and prompting drivers to question standards at other tracks. Gordon was not injured, but he could have been severely hurt—or worse.

Whew! Is everybody ready to put it in park for a while?

"It's time to just enjoy being around the house," says Newman, who, along with most of his competitors, isn't around the house all that often during the season.

It isn't that everybody's fatigued; it's just a good time for a break, both for refreshment and reassessment.

"I love what I do, but I also like to step away from it," says Jeff Burton, who won at Bristol. "I think the five-week thing and a week off really works well for the beginning of the year. We've had three different styles of tracks instead of five. I think that helps the teams with preparation. I'm ready for an off-weekend, not because I'm tired or anything, but it lets us step back and look at what we've done and assess where we need to be."

Although the first few weeks of the season have been quite different from what was expected, there is little reason to believe any tectonic shifts are taking place. By midsummer, some of the hanging questions—Are tires going to be a problem at places like Texas and Darlington? Can Kyle Busch keep his star floating around the top of the sport?—should be answered.

A few weeks in, though, things appear very unsettled. Stay tuned.

Mike Hembree is an associate editor for NASCAR Scene. Read more from Hembree at scenedaily.com.

speedreads

Brian Vickers has raced his way comfortably into the top 35 in points, which means a guaranteed starting spot for each Cup race. That's significant because he made the field only 23 times last season.

I hate to hear people say Dale Jarrett's reputation is tarnished because he finished his career as an also-ran. No one looks at Darrell Waltrip's career that way.

I appreciate Kyle Busch's style, but peaking early can be a problem come Chase time—just look at Jimmie Johnson. Only when Johnson learned how to pace himself over the course of a season did he win his championships. —Roger Kuznia





Tony Stewart has become the leader he long insisted he never wanted to be. Two weeks ago, he disparaged Goodyear in an attempt to force the tire company to do a better job. His weak-spined co-racers would only marginally support him-and several said he overreacted. Stewart was right about the tires, and he was right to speak out. Fans, NASCAR and the drivers should thank him. He has become the voice of the garage, regardless of whether he wants to be. > Good for Richard Childress Racing to finish first, second and third last Sunday at Bristol. But let's not get carried away. A strong car at Bristol portends success maybe at Dover but nowhere else. Kevin Harvick, who finished second, won the spring race at Bristol in 2005 and wasn't heard from again that season. Jeff Burton, who won the race Sunday, finished a strong second in the race last season but didn't contend for the championship. > You have to wonder what qualifications team owners look for in a driver. Michael McDowell will make his Sprint Cup debut next Sunday at Martinsville. He has made just five starts combined in the Nationwide and Craftsman Truck Series. He has just one lead lap finish. How does that qualify him to run with the big boys on Sunday? It doesn't. But having a team owner, Michael Waltrip, willing to give him a seat does. At least he will debut at a relatively safe place. Martinsville is the shortest track on the circuit and therefore has the slowest speeds. It's not unheard of for NASCAR to ban inexperienced drivers from a race. > FOX's audio works, right? Producers could hear Darrell Waltrip, right? So why were fans subjected to that? I love D.W.—he's the best TV analyst in any sport-but having him on air while fighting a nasty case of laryngitis was a bad decision.

The outspoken Stewart is the leader in the garage, if not the point standings.



Biffle has a chance to show he's a legitimate contender for the championship over the next five races.

The key to Biffle's early success: He's having fun

To understand why Greg Biffle is off to one of the best starts of his career-he's second in Sprint Cup points-you need only to recall his postrace comments at Las Vegas, where he notched his first top five finish of the season despite a couple of pit road mishaps-including a penalty for speeding.

"This is the most fun I've had driving a racecar in probably a year or two," Biffle told reporters after finishing third in the UAW-Dodge 400. "A lot of times these races are real stressful and a lot of pressure, and I feel really good getting out of the car right now. I just had a lot of fun today and just wish there would have been five more

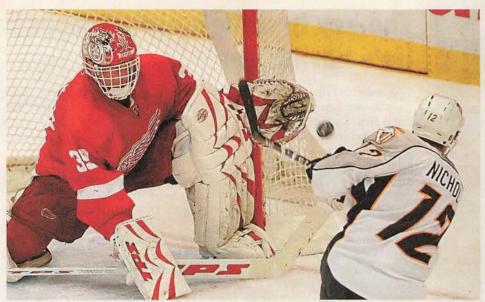
Because of his disappointing 2007 performance, it's easy to forget Biffle won two races and ranked third with 993 laps led in 2006. That came on the heels of a six-win

2005 season and second-place finish (behind the ultrahot Stewart) in the Chase. Biffle's early 2008 success supports an old racing adage: The man hasn't forgotten how to drive.

How Biffle handles the next five races should determine whether he's a legitimate contender to win the Sprint Cup championship. Over that span, he will compete at two tracks-Martinsville and Talladegawhere he has one top 10 finish in 20 combined races. And with both of those tracks also scheduled to host races in the Chase portion of the schedule, Biffle would get a major confidence boost-not to mention valuable points-with good finishes this time around.

Biffle's last run at Martinsville (seventh) was encouraging, but he has four straight DNFs at Talladega-three because of wrecks. -R.K.





A healthy dose of Hasek might be more than any other Stanley Cup hopeful can handle.

A rash of injuries melted the confidence of the NHL's best team. But now the Red Wings are healthy, rested and ready to make a deep playoff run.

These Wings aren't broken

ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Five teams are still jockeying

for a top playoff seed in the East.

Stay up-to-date for the stretch run

with results and analysis at

sportingnews.com.

By Ted Kulfan

arely had the Red Wings looked more beatable, more vulnerable. After a 41-10-4 start, the NHL's seemingly invincible team was shattered when a slew of injuries slowed its high-powered offense and forced coach Mike Babcock to turn to young prospects who weren't quite ready to contribute regularly. The Wings started to lose-at an unheard-of clip.

They won only one of 11 games during a dismal (1-8-2) February stretch and watched their oncecommanding Western Conference lead shrink to four points. The team that had looked so unbeatable looked ready to fold.

But it didn't. And don't be surprised if that lesson in humility actually helps the Red Wings as the regular season gives way to the playoffs. They're getting healthy and opened March with a fivegame winning streak that suggests there are good

things to come. The reason for those good things, ironically, might be all those injuries.

"We're as fresh at this point in the season as we've ever been," general manager Ken Holland says.

Defensemen Nicklas Lid-

strom (knee), Brian Rafalski (groin), Chris Chelios (leg) and Niklas Kronwall (clavicle) all missed substantial time in February. Obviously, the talent drop-off from the best top four defensive group in the league was difficult to overcome, no matter how much skill the Wings have overall.

"We like our young kids, but we like having those guys on the ice even more," Babcock says.

When all but Chelios returned in early March. the difference was clear. This is a team that depends on its talented defense to initiate offense out of its zone-igniting the attack while also quarterback-

With all of the defensemen back on the ice, the Wings quickly returned to elite status.

"If we can move the puck from the back end, it makes life a lot easier for us, and that's what happened," Babcock says.

Those defensemen are rested now after having played more than 20 minutes per game through the early portion of the schedule.

> Also rested and eager for the stretch drive and playoffs is Hall of Fame-bound goaltender Dominik Hasek, who battled through two minor hip flexor injuries during the first half of the season. Hasek watched as his goaltending



The Canucks appear ready to part company with LW Markus Naslund, unless the team can find common ground with him before July 1. The club reportedly has made no effort to re-sign its captain, a potential free agent who has been a big contributor in Vancouver since 1996. > Another team captain probably is on his way out in Philadelphia. D Jason Smith, who also will be a free agent, figures to leave after one season with the Flyers, clearing the way for new franchise poster boy C Mike Richards to take the leadership mantle. > Few heads turned last summer when the Oilers let D Jan Hejda walk. But new Blue Jackets G.M. Scott Howson didn't waste time grabbing the veteran Czech star. Heida has been a stalwart on Columbus' defense this season. > Anybody wondering whether the Predators have this goalie thing backward? Backup Dan Ellis is 19-9-2 with a 2.40 goals-against average and .920 save percentage on a team battling for the final Western Conference playoff spot. Starting goalie Chris Mason is 17-20-6, 2.94 and .899. Look for Ellis to get more playing time down the stretch as the Predators try to overtake the Canucks, Avalanche and Wild. Contributing: Ray Slover, Ron Smith

partner, Chris Osgood, achieved All-Star status and posted remarkable numbers. When he was available, Hasek found himself alternating starts with Osgood.

Now healthy and getting the majority of playing time heading into the playoffs, Hasek, even at 43, looks capable of carrying the team as he did during the 2002 Stanley Cup season.

"I'm excited—I have a lot to prove," Hasek says.

The Wings also are expecting to get back 20-goal right winger Dan Cleary, who broke his jaw in an early-February game against Toronto. Cleary's tough play around the net has been missed, as well.

"You want to be playing your best heading into the playoffs," Babcock says. "That's what you work for the entire season."

Don't be surprised to see the suddenly healthy Red Wings return to the sublime level of play they showed throughout their early season—a really bad omen for the rest of the league.

ing a consistently lethal power play.





By Matt Hayes

mhayes@sportingnews.com

've got a friend who thinks too much. You know, one of those guys with a master's from Wharton hanging on his wall who-I swear-once overanalyzed the inner workings of service at our local diner.

Why do I bring this up, you ask? Because my pal grew up in Seattle and is an absolute wack job when it comes

to Washington football. And, for the life of him, he can't figure out how his beloved Huskies have become a Pac-10 afterthought.

I have this unfiltered, uncomplicated answer: Nice guys finish last.

Tyrone Willingham is a good man; there could be no finer ambassador for the game. But he's simply not cut out for the cutthroat world. Coaching in the 21st century means recruiting and begging and pandering to high school teenagers. It means pushing, prodding and motivating-and walking the fine

line of father figure and unrelenting, uncaring warden.

Above all, it means winning games. That, everyone, is why no coach is under more pressure than Willingham to win this fall. Washington has won 11 games in Willingham's three seasons, and if he hadn't lucked into uberrecruit quarterback Jake Locker-a dyed-in-purple Husky all his life-last year might have been Willing-

Let's not forget what Washington is: a tradition-rich

program with the monetary and administrative support to be a consistent factor in the national title chase. Not some

tomato can finishing the run in the Apple Cup for state pride.

Three months ago, Todd Turner resigned as athletic director at Washington, in part because of philosophical differences with president Mark Emmert. Turner said winning had become too important, that there had to be

a bigger picture. Here's your big picture: empty seats at Husky Stadium, lagging interest and scarce revenue sources for a proposed \$400 million stadium renovation. And a team with six Pac-10 victories in three sea-

Willingham may

be down to his last

chance in Seattle.

tion at LSU not so long ago. A tradition-rich school had fallen hard and was on the verge of insignificance before Emmert hired Nick Saban. Four years later, LSU won the national title.

To this day, Saban praises Emmert as a visionary, a president who had a plan and executed it. Now, I ask you, does Emmert sound like a man who will accept another once-proud but floundering program—his alma mater, no less-losing 25 games in three seasons? "For me," Emmert says, "it's critical to stay on top of what's going on in athletics."

You don't need a master's from Wharton to see where this is headed.

speedread

Georgia's Mark Richt gets

\$2.8 million per season-

and he's still the fifth-high-

est-paid coach in the SEC.

more than the combined

Another angle: His salary is

salaries of the nine coaches

in the Sun Belt conference.

an \$800,000 raise-to

Emmert inherited a similar situa-

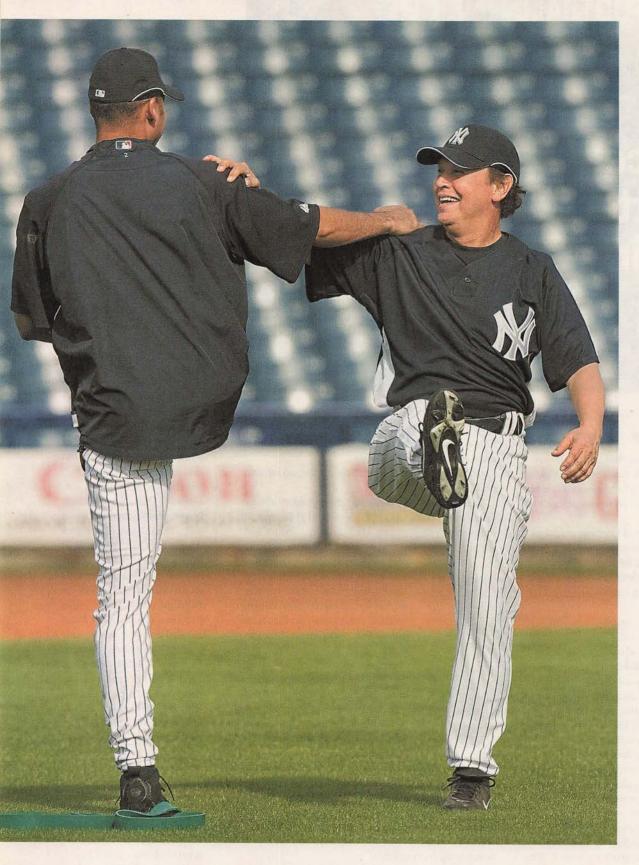
ONLINE EXCLUSIVE

Does your favorite team have one of the top 25 players in the game? Check out Matt Hayes' rankings at sportingnews.com.



Ohio State cornerbacks coach Taver Johnson spent time last week with the South Florida defensive staff to get a better understanding of how to stop Rich Rodriguez's spread option offense at Michigan. USF defensive coordinator Wally Burnham told me last fall there was no secret to shutting down West Virginia when Rodriguez was there. The key: Everything had to be funneled inside. Because USF had two physical cover cornerbacks and two speedy, athletic ends, the Bulls' safeties could play closer to the line of scrimmage and force WVU to choose whom to block. Ohio State has the personnel at cornerback (Malcolm Jenkins, Donald Washington) but not at end. Then again, Rodriguez doesn't have QB Pat White at Michigan. > If preseason darling Georgia has a weakness, it's on the offensive line, where the Bulldogs could start a true freshman at center. Ben Jones enrolled in January and already is taking snaps with the first unit. Last year, Trinton Sturdivant became the first true freshman since 1989 to start an opener at left tackle for Georgia. He was one of the SEC's best pass blockers by the end of the season. > It appears freshman RB Josh Haden, who already is enrolled at Boston College, will win a starting spot. Lost amid the hype of BC's offense with OB Matt Ryan was the team's fall from the nation's rushing elite (106th last season). Florida badly wanted Haden, whose brother Joe Haden started as a freshman cornerback for the

Gators last fall.

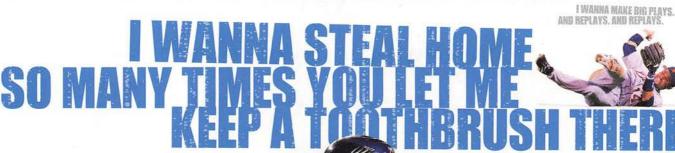


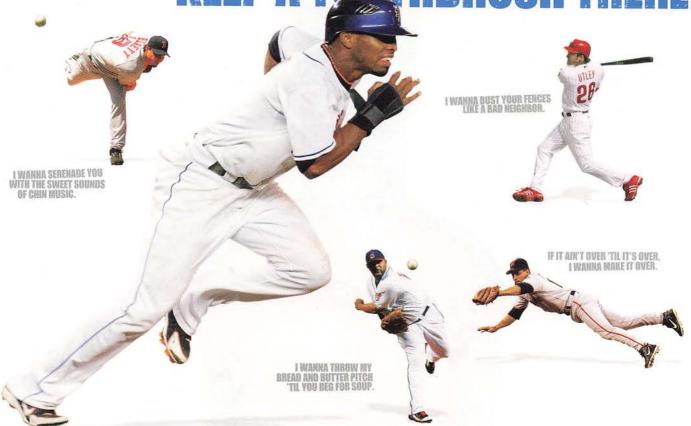
EXPSURE

The Unnatural

Sixty-year-old rookie Billy Crystal loosened up his funny bones last week with Derek Jeter—who helped the comic live a dream by getting him into the lineup for a spring training game. Alas, the day will live in infamy as The Schneid of a Yankee: one at-bat, one strikeout, one loss for the Bombers.

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